

HELIX INFINITY

Version 26.5

Jonny Lewis

NOTE:

I leave it to the producer and director
to create their own amazing game worlds
for the journeys of Jean-Paul and Tarina.

To save the reader the burden of having to
fathom a complex game world that constantly cuts
between two other locations, I have
simply used dinosaurs as placeholders.

JonnyLewis.com
JonnyTheActor@gmail.com
323-286-3999
Moscow mobile phone:
903-997-54-99

1

INT. HAYWARD - CITY BUS - LATE AFTERNOON

The bus rattles through early September traffic. In the back row sits TARINA CLEMMONS, 14, African American, thin, hood up. She wears fitted training shorts ending just above the knee. An Appaloosa-pattern overnight bag rests at her feet. Thin brown gloves cover her hands as she pulls an iPad from the bag.

She taps the screen, and a bold logo ignites:

"T-ROX"

The letters fracture like cracked stone, then snap into place. She taps ENTER. A lush, stylized world loads.

Tarina's avatar, athletic, stands at the edge of a vast circular chamber. Pale blue lanterns glow along the surrounding walls.

Her skin pattern: APPALOOSA.

At the center of the room: a stone island, separated by a five-foot gap of dark green water.

She runs forward--leaps the gap--lands cleanly on the island.

At the island's center rises a tall mirror framed in slow-turning brass gears.

She touches one of the brass gears. The mirror surface ripples.

2

EXT. EAST SAN JOSE - CITY PARK - MORNING

JEAN-PAUL MBENGUE (26), French-Senegalese, athletic, engaging, ready smile, arrives wearing a bright blue track suit. Carrying a red duffel bag, he jogs into a concrete urban park where a dozen TEENS of different races--a boy/girl ratio of about two to one--practice parkour moves. Mbengue speaks English well, but with a French accent.

LESHAWN (18), natural leader, calls out.

LESHAWN

Hey, Mr. Mbengue, where were you?

JEAN-PAUL

You know I am always here for you. But the bus, it broke down. I had to wait for the next one. Have you been practicing, LeShawn?

LESHAWN

Every day.

JEAN-PAUL

Excellent!

DAVID (16), Japanese American, wiry, eager, chimes in.

DAVID

Mr. Bengue, can you help me with my wall climb?

JEAN-PAUL

My name is Mbengue.

(smiles)

Mmm-Bengue. You can call me Jean-Paul if you like. You are new today, yes?

DAVID

Yeah. LeShawn says you're the best in the world.

JEAN-PAUL

The best, it lasts for one day. You can show me your best today! One moment, please.

He turns to LeShawn.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

Please take these kids to practice jump-ups, and I will help you soon.

LESHAWN

Can we work on my *saut de chat*?

JEAN-PAUL

Très bien, you remember *le français*!

LESHAWN

Can I try the double *saut de chat*?

JEAN-PAUL

We will see. First, you make the single *parfait*.

LeShawn nods, then waves for a group of teens to follow him to a low wall. Jean-Paul turns back to David.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

Show me what you know of the wall climb.

Jean-Paul and David head over to an eight-foot-high brick wall.

3 EXT. HAYWARD - STOREFRONT - DAY

Tarina walks along a row of stores. Clothing racks spill out onto the sidewalk. As she passes one--

Two 8-YEAR-OLD FILIPINO GIRLS burst out from between the hanging clothes.

LITTLE GIRL #1

Yaaaah!

Tarina reflexively turns toward the shout--and we see she has VITILIGO.

LITTLE GIRL #2

Monster!

Laughing, the girls dart back through the racks and into the store. Tarina takes a quick inhale, pulls her hood closer over her face, exhales and keeps walking.

4 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RODRIGO'S OFFICE - DAY

HAYWARD, CALIFORNIA

RODRIGO VASQUEZ, president of Vasquez Virtual, (31), trim, in a three-piece suit, vest buttoned, sits at his desk, phone on speaker. Hardware engineer AKARSH RAO (28), Indian, slender, upbeat, and Rodrigo's brother RAFA VASQUEZ (33), in jeans and a light blue Oxford shirt, rolled sleeves, sit in large black leather chairs across from him.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)

It's my job to find loose ends
before they unravel. Does that
French guy have a clean history?

RODRIGO

Jean-Paul? Saved a kid from a
burning building once, back in
France--using his parkour skills.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)

PR dream. That heroism rubs off on
Vasquez.

RODRIGO

(proudly)
Yes, I thought so.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
This demo needs to smash your
competitors.

RODRIGO
It will. Nobody has hardware like
we do. Akarsh's haptic stack is the
best--bar none.

Akarsh smiles at the compliment.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
Doesn't Black Dragon VR also have a
haptic stack?

AKARSH
They have a suit, but not the whole
stack. And their suit is only about
seventy percent as capable as ours.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
We like it. And the software?

RODRIGO
Best in the game world. Still, we
did feel it was prudent to advance
the demo. So when Ziggy D canceled
and the arena became available--

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
We agree. Lucky break, good
decision.

Rod smiles.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
But you understand, if this demo
doesn't grab enough eyeballs we'll
be forced to drop you.

RODRIGO
Oh, it will grab eyeballs. It'll
grab everything. Helix Infinity Six
will be the hottest thing in VR. In
gaming, period.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
Dominion Capital won't do the IPO
unless it's a blow-away.

Rafa and Akarsh exchange a look. Akarsh, eyebrows raised,
mouths "Dominion Capital." Rafa shakes his head and gives Rod
a sharp look, but Rod is focused on his call.

RODRIGO
After this demo, the game world
will talk about nothing else.

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
We hope so.

RODRIGO
Any final questions?

JAMESON-RICHTER FINANCIAL (V.O.)
Just show us. Today.

RODRIGO
Done.

Rodrigo taps the console--ends the call.

The intercom BUZZES.

JUDY (V.O.)
Rod, you've got a call on two.

RODRIGO
No more calls. It's launch time.

JUDY (V.O.)
He said it's important.

RODRIGO
I'm done for the day, Judy.

JUDY (V.O.)
"Mission critical," is what he
said.

Rod's expression changes.

RODRIGO
Thanks. I'll take it.

Rod waves Rafa and Akarsh away. Akarsh rises and exits. Rafa
stays firmly rooted in his chair.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)
Beyond your pay grade, Rafa.

RAFA
My code built this company.

RODRIGO
My *vision* built this company.

Rafa stays put. With no other choice, Rodrigo picks up the receiver.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)
Rodrigo Vasquez.

Listens.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)
That's correct... No, not
immediately... Level three... Yes,
it will. Goodbye.

Rodrigo hangs up the phone.

RAFA
Rod, are you inviting someone to
the game who shouldn't be playing?

Rodrigo smiles unabashedly.

RAFA (CONT'D)
Already invited them. Fine. You
want this company, you can have it.

Rafa gets up to leave.

RODRIGO
(to Rafa's back)
It was always mine, Rafa.

5 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LOBBY - DAY

Tarina enters, puts her hood down. She carries her Appaloosa bag slung over her shoulder. JUDY WU (27), Chinese-American, wears a sleek silver chin-length wig, pink at the tips. On the phone at her desk, she waves as Tarina enters. Rafa spots Tarina as he crosses the large open office area.

RAFA
T-ROX!

TARINA
(smiles)
The original.

Through his glass-walled office, Rodrigo gives Tarina a quick wave, then gets back to his phone conversation. BEATRICE CLEMMONS, 36, confident African American, stylishly dressed, gets up from her desk and goes to greet Tarina.

TARINA (CONT'D)

Hi, Aunt Bea! I brought my bag in case I could stay with you tonight.

BEATRICE

No, hon, I'm sorry, not tonight. You know we're super busy with the launch.

TARINA

Yeah, I know.

BEATRICE

Next weekend, I promise.

TARINA

Okay. Can Akarsh show me the gear?

BEATRICE

Sure, let's go get him.

As they move past Rodrigo's office and down a corridor, Akarsh pops out of an office and intercepts them.

AKARSH

Miss T-ROX. You are here to see the haptic suit?

TARINA

Oh yeah.

AKARSH

It's in the lab. Come with me.

Tarina and Beatrice follow Akarsh down the hall, through the office space, and into the lab.

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INT. HAPTICS RESEARCH LAB - CONTINUOUS

Akarsh leads them into the room. The sturdy metal door clangs shut behind them. A huge MONSTER PLANET INFERNO banner adorns one wall. Three tall metal lockers stand against a side wall, stenciled clearly:

"DEV SUIT - AKARSH"

"ARENA SUIT - JEAN-PAUL"

"PROTOTYPE"

A nine-foot-wide round platform dominates the center of the room--sort of like a round boxing ring.

The floor of the platform is a dense field of thousands of tiny black rollers. A waist-high metal rail encircles it, padded along the top.

TARINA
(quiet awe)
Oh my God. The Omni-Ring.
(points her open palm
toward it)
Can I...?

AKARSH
Get on? Sure.

Tarina reverently steps onto the platform and takes two tentative steps, as if enjoying a deep plush carpet barefoot.

TARINA
Ohhhhh, yeah.

Beatrice and Akarsh both chuckle.

BEATRICE
You know you're not gonna be able
to get her off it now.

Tarina spots half a dozen brain-caps resting on charging racks.

AKARSH
Ah, but she'll have to get off to
see the haptic stack.

Tarina steps off the platform, walks over to Akarsh. He takes the Prototype haptic suit out of its locker. It's sleek and flexible, with a bundled high-bandwidth data cable attached at the lower back.

TARINA
May I?

AKARSH
Yes--carefully. These are one-of-a-kind. Well, three of a kind.

She takes the haptic suit from him, holds it to her chest like a beloved cashmere sweater. Still holding it with one hand, she reaches for a brain cap.

TARINA
If you need a tester...

AKARSH

I wish I could, but safety rules
dictate only persons over eighteen.

TARINA

Safety? It's virtual reality.

Tarina sees a dozen sets of contact lens cases of various
colors.

TARINA (CONT'D)

Contact lenses, built-in video?

AKARSH

Of course. But ours doesn't just
track your eyes--it *predicts* them.
Feeds your brain the image a
fraction early, so your body
commits before you even realize
you've seen it.

BEATRICE

Honey, I think Akarsh probably has
to get back to work now.

Akarsh nods. She reluctantly hands him back the suit.

TARINA

Does "Prototype" mean Jean-Paul's
suit is more advanced?

AKARSH

No, they're essentially the same
suit. We just made the prototype
first, that's all.

Tarina nods.

TARINA

When these go on the market, will
gamers need a special interface to
hook up to their computer?

AKARSH

USB-C.

TARINA

USB-C is enough, really?

AKARSH

Yes. Right now it still has to be
wired. But I'm working on a next-
gen wireless. Six months.

TARINA

The Omni-Ring...will players need that?

AKARSH

No, that's seventh generation. We can't ask gamers to pay for such an expensive device until--

BEATRICE

Until after we've hooked them with them sixth generation gear.

Akarsh laughs. Beatrice checks the time on her phone.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

Tarina...

TARINA

Yeah. Thank you so much, Akarsh. And thank you for making this stuff.

AKARSH

Well, yes, the haptics are my baby. But don't forget who created your T-ROX game.

TARINA

(hugs Beatrice)

Yes, thank you, Aunt Beatrice!

Breaking away after the hug, they exit the lab, with Tarina taking one last look at everything before the heavy metal door clangs shut.

7

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LOBBY - DAY

They pause for a moment to say their goodbyes.

TARINA

Oh--I left my bag in there.

BEATRICE

Make it quick.

Tarina trots back down the hall.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

You are so kind to give her your time--especially today.

AKARSH

I know players appreciate my tech--
i get emails--but she is so
thrilled, I love seeing her
enjoyment. It reminds me why I do
this work.

BEATRICE

(calling down the hallway)
Tarina!

Tarina dashes up to them, her Appaloosa bag over her
shoulder. She beams at Akarsh in thanks.

AKARSH

(smiles warmly)
You're welcome.

RODRIGO

(calling from his office)
Beatrice!

BEATRICE

(to Tarina)
Gotta go.

TARINA

Thank you so much, Aunt Bea!

Tarina gives Beatrice a hug--quick but strong. Then she
dashes to the exit door--only remembering at the last second
to put her hood back up again.

8

INT. SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE - JACK MURPHY'S OFFICE - DAY

A glass-walled office overlooking the newsroom. JACK MURPHY
(65), tall, gray at the temples, types at his computer.

The door opens. MAUREEN "MO" GROPMAN (42), scraggly brown
shoulder length hair, thrift store blazer, steps in, canvas
messenger bag slung over her shoulder.

MO

Jack, don't you have someone in
Arts & Leisure who can write this
piece?

JACK

It's an important story, Mo.

MO

It's a computer game company.

JACK
Poised for an IPO, because it's
launching the hottest new virtual
reality tech in the last ten years.

MO
It's a familiar story.

JACK
There's an intriguing rumor on this
one.

She checks her rideshare app: DRIVER ARRIVING IN 2 MINUTES.

MO
I gotta get to the arena.

She throws her tablet into her bag, heads for the exit. Jack
yells after her.

JACK
DARPA!

9 INT. TARINA'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

Tarina walks down the hallway carrying her Appaloosa bag. Her
mother, CHARLISSE DILLINGHAM (40), African American, stern,
calls out from another room.

TARINA'S MOM (O.S.)
Tarina, you need to get ready for
the party!

TARINA
(as she enters her room)
I'm not going!

10 INT. RIDESHARE - DAY

Mo finishes buckling in, then quickly dials her phone. Jack
answers, and she starts right off.

MO
DARPA? A game company in bed with
the Defense Department? You're
yankin' my chain, Murph.

She straightens up.

MO (CONT'D)
Since the 1980s? I *am* a good
researcher, Jack!
(MORE)

MO (CONT'D)

You just weren't clear on the
nature of the assignment.

She fumbles in her canvas bag, pulls out her PRESS ID on a worn lanyard.

MO (CONT'D)

I'll believe it when I see it.

She hangs up, puts the lanyard around her neck, grabs her tablet, and googles "DARPA and virtual reality."

11 INT. TARINA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tarina sits at a computer table with a serious GAMING PC and external speakers. There is a MAKEUP KIT next to it, and a mug with the words "HELIX INFINITY." At the top of her monitor there is taped a printed-out strip of paper that says: "The possibilities are endless." The Appaloosa bag sits on the table as the computer powers up. She starts putting on makeup to cover her vitiligo. Tarina's mother struts into the room.

CHARLISSE

(sternly)

Fifteen minutes.

Charlisse leaves without waiting for an answer. Tarina ignores her, quickly finishes her makeup, then gets up and closes the door. She unzips her Appaloosa bag and holds up its contents: a haptic suit, plus a brain cap and a small case. She removes contact lenses from the case and inserts them into her eyes.

12 EXT. EAST SAN JOSE - CITY PARK - MORNING

The parkour teens train across rails, walls, and other obstacles.

David tries for a kash vault across a picnic table, but hesitates, and his butt clips the table.

DAVID

Oof!

JEAN-PAUL

First, you must decide one hundred percent. It is okay to wait, but after you decide, go and do not stop.

David nods, backs up to go again.

Jean-Paul does a double kong over the picnic table lengthwise, then skips over to coach Kat and Marco, who are attempting a wall run.

Marco sprints at the wall--gets halfway up--slides off.

MARCO

Damn!

Kat tries, reaches for the edge, gets on top, but awkwardly.

JEAN-PAUL

(to Marco)

You must place your first foot higher.

(to Kat)

Place your hands on the top, not only your fingers. It will give you more strength.

Marco nods, tries again--better. Kat retries, makes it to the top smoothly this time.

LeShawn flows through a short line--tic tac over a crate, strides across two low planter walls, then a dash vault over a medium high wall, ending in a precision jump to a bike rack bar. Savors the landing, smiles, drops to the ground.

Laura follows in LeShawn's path--slower, but competent--wobbles on the bike rack bar and hops off backward to avoid a fall.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

(to Laura)

First, try each obstacle separately. When you can do each one perfect five times, only then put them together.

Jean-Paul picks up his duffel bag from near a tree.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

Now, I have to go, my friends.

LESHAWN

Mr. Mbengue, what time does your VR show start?

JEAN-PAUL

Five o'clock. You will watch me?

KAT

Of course!

JEAN-PAUL
 Au revoir, tout le monde!

Various goodbyes from the teens.

As Jean-Paul passes him, Stan nails a lache from a tree branch to a low concrete planter around another tree. Jean-Paul points to Stan and raises a victory fist.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)
 Good for you, Stan!

Stan allows himself a proud smile.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)
 I will see you all next week! The world is your playground!

He leaves, and the teens continue practicing their moves.

13 INT. TARINA'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Tarina sits at her desk, haptic suit on, chat window scrolling. She adjusts the webcam angle.

ON SCREEN: LIVE.

Chat builds as friends see she is online. Most remain silent, just watchers.

UUNIKORNIA
 TARIIIIII!

PFUZZLEQUEEN
 tarinamania!

UUNIKORNIA
 wachu wearin girl?

Tarina leans forward.

TARINA
 u will not beleev what i scored from vaskez!

UUNIKORNIA
 u got merch?

PFUZZLEQUEEN
 nah she stole some shit din u?

She lifts the brain cap into frame.

UUNIKORNIA
wo shit!

PFUZZLEQUEEN
same game, t-rox?

TARINA
game same, system new. helix
infinity 6.

Chat is up to 12 users now.

UUNIKORNIA
u got the helix?!!

TARINA
yeah an today i got the haptix! did
levl 2 with helix 5. today i go
levl 3--helix 6!

Tarina slips on the brain cap.

PFUZZLEQUEEN
helix infinity...and beyond!

Tarina smiles broadly and hits the Enter key. She hums a tune and her body sways to it as she begins to play the game.

14 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - INNER CONCOURSE - NIGHT

Mo Gropman walks the circular concourse, phone to her ear, talking to Jack. The roar of the crowd inside leaks out through the arena entrances.

MO
(on phone)
People *watching* other people play
video games? We've come to this?
(pause)
Well, when we do start another war,
send me there. This is gonna be
torture.

She ends the call, then steps through the tunnel into the arena.

15 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - FLOOR - NIGHT

"VASQUEZ VIRTUAL" blazes across LED banners around the arena. PACKED with people--mostly gamers--armed with phones, tablets, laptops. A JUMBOTRON dominates the space, displaying scenes from the MONSTER PLANET INFERNO game world.

Mo raises her phone, flips to selfie mode, starts filming. She spots Akarsh Rao, wearing his "Vasquez Virtual" BADGE, and approaches him.

MO GROPMAN

Excuse me, hi, you're with Vasquez Virtual?

AKARSH

I'm sorry--who are you?

MO GROPMAN

Mo Gropman. San Francisco Chronicle.

AKARSH

Oh, right. Beatrice said--.

MO GROPMAN

(reads his ID tag)
You're the gear guy.

AKARSH

Yeah, I'm the toy maker. I designed the haptic stack.

MO GROPMAN

Haptic stack?

AKARSH

Haptic suit, haptic boots, gloves, etcetera.

MO

And haptics are...?

AKARSH

Haptics are the tech that makes players *feel* as well as see everything. Plus the video feeds in the contact lenses, the audio.

MO GROPMAN

Wow. This ain't no Mario Bros.
(pronounces it "Broze")

Akarsh chuckles.

AKARSH

No. When something hits you in Monster Planet Inferno--you definitely feel it.

MO GROPMAN

Thanks to your haptic stack.

AKARSH

Exactly. Now, if you'll excuse me,
I have to get back to Rodrigo.

(noticing)

But hey, check out Jean-Paul at the
wall.

MO GROPMAN

Vasquez Virtual's stunt man front
man?

AKARSH

He's much more than that. In
France, he once used his parkour
skills to rescue a child from a
burning building.

Mo turns toward the front and sees what everyone is now
looking at: Jean-Paul, in a sleeveless tank top and tapered
training pants, sprints down a RUN-UP LANE cut through the
arena floor--ropes and stagehands keeping the crowd back.

Ahead, a vertical WALL rises twenty feet from the floor to
the front edge of the main stage, still DARK. He hits it at
full speed. Three steps up the face of the wall. As he plants
his third step, his hands catch the edge, and he powers
himself up onto the stage above.

16 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - STAGE - NIGHT

LIGHTS SNAP ON.

Two COSTUMED MONSTERS close in. Jean-Paul cuts sideways,
slipping past the first. The second lunges, but he shoves it
off balance, sending it down hard but safe. A third monster
crouches low, arms reaching out wide to grab him. Jean-Paul
does a front flip cleanly over it, and dashes to a stone
pedestal with a SWORD embedded in it. He grabs the sword,
yanks it free and raises it high.

The crowd ROARS. Then the stage goes dark again, and the
Jumbotron cycles through visuals from the Monster Planet
Inferno game.

17 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - FLOOR - NIGHT

Mo lifts her phone, filming the crowd and the Jumbotron.

Near the stage on the ARENA FLOOR: a long display table lined with 100 DEMO VR HEADSETS. A SIGN: "HEADSET RAFFLE AT END OF SHOW." Two SECURITY GUARDS stand watch. One tough-looking guy floats over to his comrade, hands him a paper cup of coffee.

SECURITY GUARD #1

Think you can handle this crowd if
a riot breaks out?

SECURITY GUARD #2

Gee, I dunno. May need help from
National Guard.

They share a chuckle, and the first one goes back to his post.

Across the arena floor, Mo spots Akarsh threading through the throng. With him: Rodrigo, Rafa, and Beatrice.

Close to the trio, a spectator, KEN (20), tall, slightly chunky, lights up.

NERD

Rod! Rodrigo! Can I get your
autograph, Sir?

Rodrigo slows, offers a charming smile, signs the autograph.

MO

(under her breath)
Rodrigo Vasquez.

She takes a step in that direction, when suddenly--

Jean-Paul drops out of the air, FLYING past Mo's face. He hits the concrete in a tight forward roll, comes up, turns, and steps back toward her.

MO (CONT'D)

What the hell?!

JEAN-PAUL

Sorry. I meant to impress, not to
surprise too much.

He points up toward a CATWALK above. Mo looks up at the catwalk, inhales, regains her composure.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

Akarsh told me to say hello.

MO

He told me you're a hero. I'd say
more like superhero.

JEAN-PAUL

(smiles)

If you have a skill, you have to use it. But that was three years ago.

(he laughs)

Now I am only a virtual hero.

MO

Virtual superhero.

JEAN-PAUL

And my parkour world championship was already six years ago.

MO

There's a parkour world championship?

JEAN-PAUL

Under the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique. The prize money was enough for me to come to America-- but not enough to live here!

MO

How do you make your living now?

JEAN-PAUL

Some stunt work. Less and less, with CGI, and now AI. My true love is teaching parkour to the children. And gaming--for fun or profit.

(gestures to the arena)

And this gig--it is the best of both worlds.

MO

Parkour and gaming.

JEAN-PAUL

Exactly.

He glances toward the wall.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

If you will excuse me--I have to do the wall jump every twenty minutes, and in between I must mix with the crowd.

MO

Of course.

JEAN-PAUL
 (beaming)
 Then at 5:00 I am starting the
 Helix Infinity game!

Jean-Paul jogs down the aisle. A spectator ahead of him suddenly drops his phone, bends to pick it up. Jean-Paul plants light hands on the guy's back--kong vaults over him.

The guy feels only a slight brush. Other spectators snicker as he looks around, puzzled.

Jean-Paul walks away, acting casual--unable to hide his playful grin.

18 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - FLOOR - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

As Jean-Paul walks away, Rodrigo, Beatrice, Rafa, and Akarsh step up to greet Mo.

RODRIGO
 Ms. Gropman! Welcome to our
 spectacle!

MO
 The crowd seems to be enjoying it.

AKARSH
 If you'll excuse me, I'll go back
 to the office now.

Rodrigo waves him goodbye. Akarsh leaves.

MO
 Your PR package says you learned to
 hack when you followed your father
 on his night janitor job in a
 Silicon Valley office building.

RODRIGO
 Beatrice put that bit in. Got to
 build the mythology.

RAFA
 Actually, I was the original coder
 for Vasquez Virtual's first VR
 program.

BEATRICE
 Which Dragon VR stole from us.

RODRIGO

(smiles)

Beatrice wasn't with us then, but
she helps us hold the grudge.

BEATRICE

Rodrigo is the designer of all
Vasquez Virtual games.

RAFA

You'll excuse me. I'm going to head
out as well.

Rafa leaves. Only Mo acknowledges his exit, with a nod.

RODRIGO

Except for the Nonviolent Games
Division--which Beatrice heads.

BEATRICE

It's just one game, but yes, I
designed it.

Beatrice gets a phone call.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

Excuse me.

She takes the call. Confusion flickers across her face--then
a pained look. She lowers the phone for a moment, then
presses it back. She says something to the caller, then hangs
up. Visibly shaken, she turns to Rod and says something into
his ear. He replies, pats her on the shoulder, and she heads
for the exit.

Jean-Paul trots up and joins the group, now with a light
windbreaker over his tank top.

RODRIGO

Our star!

(to Jean-Paul)

Jean-Paul, would you mind taking
Ms. Gropman to Vasquez Virtual?

JEAN-PAUL

But of course. I am just leaving
now.

RODRIGO

I'll be along shortly.

Mo exits with Jean-Paul.

19

INT. COUNTY HOSPITAL - PSYCHIATRIC OBSERVATION UNIT - EVENING

A dim corridor. Beatrice stands at a reinforced observation window, looking into a locked hospital room. A PSYCHIATRIST (50s) stands next to her. Through the glass: Charlisse sits upright in a chair next to a hospital bed, eyes open, unblinking, IV in her arm, lips slightly parted.

PSYCHIATRIST

A neighbor found her in her
daughter's bedroom, screaming.
Called 911. By the time we got her
she had stopped talking. Catatonic.

BEATRICE

Does anyone know what happened?

PSYCHIATRIST

Neighbor had no idea. Paramedics
said she just kept screaming:
"She's gone." Maybe your niece ran
away?

BEATRICE

That wouldn't explain this.

PSYCHIATRIST

I suppose not.

Beatrice stares at her sister.

BEATRICE

My niece wasn't home?

PSYCHIATRIST

Neighbor didn't see her. But...your
sister was in her bedroom. Maybe
they had an argument, then your
niece ran off.

BEATRICE

That doesn't make sense. Tarina
should be home. She doesn't like
being out.

The psychiatrist nods.

PSYCHIATRIST

We'll evaluate her again in the
morning. Sometimes they come out of
it gradually.

Beatrice watches Charlisse's unmoving face.

BEATRICE
 You'll call me if she says
 anything. Or starts to...move
 again?

PSYCHIATRIST
 Of course.

20 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - FLOOR - NIGHT

Ken drops back into his seat beside OLIVER (18), short, skinny) and SUSAN (22), Latina, serious. He flashes a signed program.

KEN
 Look what I got!

Oliver and Susan lean in to see.

OLIVER
 Score! Did you get his brother's
 autograph?

KEN
 What for?

OLIVER
 Dude, Rafa wrote all the early
 code. He built that company.

KEN
 Like Woz built Apple?

SUSAN
 Who?

OLIVER
 Wozniak!

Susan shrugs, slightly annoyed, as if a "Wozniak" is off topic--some sort of *Lord of the Rings* character.

SUSAN
 (taps Ken's program)
 A man with vision.
 (to Ken)
 Can I see it?

Ken hands it to her. She studies the bold flourished signature with admiration.

SUSAN (CONT'D)
 Rodrigo Vazquez.

21 INT. TARINA'S HOUSE - EVENING

Beatrice knocks. No answer. She tries the knob. Locked. She pulls a key out of her purse, unlocks the door and enters. The house is quiet.

On the dining room table--Beatrice's keys and a full cup of tea, gone cold. She moves through the empty, silent living room, then heads down the hallway.

22 ON THE ARENA FLOOR

J.C., Chinese-American male, 20, electric blue hair, and JAE, Korean-American female, 20, vivid purple hair, weave through the crowd. Both wear flashy gold satin bomber jackets, with "J.C. & JAE" in bold purple lettering across the back.

Jae holds a small stabilized camera rig, live-streaming. J.C. leans into frame, hyped.

J.C.
(into camera)
J.C. and Jae here!

JAE
We are LIVE with Vasquez Virtual at the Oakland Arena. This is *insane*, people!

J.C.
I am definitely on the list to get the new haptic stack when it hits the market.

Jae turns the camera back on herself.

JAE
Gotta hit up our buddy Rodrigo to comp us an Omni-Ring!

J.C.
Oh, yeah! Seventh gen!

She spins the camera around the arena--lights, crowd, stage. Ken spots them.

KEN
Hey, Jae!

They glance--giving a quick, polished influencer smile, then--

Jae's eyes look past Ken. She has spotted bigger game: Rodrigo Vasquez, walking alone now toward an exit.

J.C. spots them too, and his eyes connect with Jae's.

J.C.

Oh yeah!

They take off in sync, camera held high, pushing through the crowd toward Rodrigo.

23 INT. TARINA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Beatrice steps inside. The room is lit only by the glow of a computer monitor. Screensaver on, webcam red light on.

Then she sees it: the haptic suit, crumpled on the floor, brain cap lying on top of it.

She looks to the screensaver. Hits the space bar, scans the chat.

She grabs Tarina's Appaloosa bag and puts the haptic gear in it.

24 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - FLOOR - EVENING

OLIVER

Ya know the tits-mode plugin I made for Black Dragon's Midnight Mayhem game? I could make one for Monster Planet Inferno.

Ken snorts.

KEN

Your tits-mode plugin for Mayhem is buggy.

OLIVER

No it's not. One tit is bigger in real life too.

KEN

Not *that* much bigger.
(to Susan)
Am I right?

SUSAN

You two are disgusting.

KEN

I don't use it in the game. I just beta tested it for him.

OLIVER
For a month and a half.

KEN
Quality assurance.

SUSAN
How would either of you know what
tits look like in real life?

Ken nods, conceding.

KEN
Touché.

25 INT. LIMO - NIGHT

Mo and Jean-Paul ride in a limo together.

MO GROPMAN
You say you're not a star, but
you're riding in a limo.

JEAN-PAUL
Hah! This? This is real only for
one day.

MO GROPMAN
But you're the star of Vasquez
Virtual. You're their brand. Or
their brand is you.

JEAN-PAUL
Vasquez does not pay for this.
Let me tell you something. You will
not hear it from any Vasquez staff.
Vasquez has no money. These funds
come from promoters.

MO GROPMAN
Promoters' money is still money.

JEAN-PAUL
There is only money for *preuve de
concept*.

MO GROPMAN
Proof of concept.

JEAN-PAUL
Yes. If this works, Rodrigo will be
a billionaire.

(MORE)

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

But if it does not, he will be like his father, a janitor.

MO GROPMAN

But of course it will work.

JEAN-PAUL

I only know--today I can play. Success or fail for Rodrigo, I will play again tomorrow.

26 EXT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL OFFICE BUILDING - AFTERNOON

The limo arrives at the Vasquez Virtual office building. A two-story light-industrial walk-up. Glass door with the "VV" logo. Jean-Paul leads the way.

27 INT. STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

Jean-Paul bounds up the stairs two at a time. Mo follows, less athletic but not too far behind. They pass a framed poster on the landing:

"BEST INDIE GAME 2029 - T-ROX."

JEAN-PAUL

Beatrice can give you the big picture. I need to check in, get ready for my game.

28 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL OFFICES - CONTINUOUS

Exposed ducts overhead. Polished concrete floors. Gaming posters dominate the walls--MONSTER PLANET INFERNO, T-ROX. An expensive espresso machine hisses in the corner--cappuccino, latte, the works. Jean-Paul and Mo enter to find Judy Wu the only one there, seated at her desk in an open office space.

JEAN-PAUL

Wu-huu!

JUDY WU

Evening, Jean-Paul!

JEAN-PAUL

This is Mo...Maureen?...Gropman.

MO GROPMAN

Just Mo. Mo Gropman. I'm with the *Chronicle*.

Judy playfully doffs her colorful wig like it's a hat. Mo goes along, amused.

JUDY WU

Nice to meet ya. You're here about Helix Infinity? Or Rodrigo Vasquez?

JEAN-PAUL

If you will excuse me.

Mo nods. He heads down the hallway.

MO GROPMAN

Aren't they pretty much one and the same?

JUDY WU

Well, there's Rafa too, but...yeah, Rod's the one.

MO GROPMAN

I'm sensing a sidebar story in my head--or in yours.

JUDY WU

DBS--Deep Brain Stimulation device. Keeps me from having seizures. Just had the surgery two months ago. It's a lifesaver.

MO GROPMAN

I can imagine. I had a college friend with epilepsy. Not fun.

JUDY WU

Beatrice isn't here at the moment, so I guess you can direct your questions to me. She designed the T-ROX game--you probably saw the poster in the stairwell.

MO GROPMAN

Yeah. Congrats.

JUDY WU

She put her whole heart into it. Designed it for her niece, but teens love it--especially girls.

MO GROPMAN

But you're more famous for Monster Planet Inferno, right?

JUDY WU

That's our biggest seller. Rod made that one. When Beatrice gets back she can better answer PR questions.

MO GROPMAN

And your role is...?

Akarsh enters from the hallway carrying a laptop, heading for the espresso machine in the kitchen.

JUDY WU

Head programmer. I work closely with our haptics engineer, Akarsh. You met him at the arena bash?

MO

Yeah. How much time do you spend playing VR games?

JUDY

Me? None.

MO

Really?

JUDY

I used to do VR. Then once, after a six-hour session I walked out of the lab and tried to teleport down the hallway. My hand actually pointed to where I wanted to go.

Akarsh overhears, comes to the kitchen doorway.

AKARSH

I saw that! It was hilarious!

JUDY

It was scary. I stood there wondering why the world wasn't moving.

AKARSH

It's called Game Transfer Phenomena. After long sessions some gamers have reported seeing health bars above people's heads.
(chuckles)

MO

(to Akarsh)

Have you had any such experiences?

AKARSH

No, but I don't play that long-- just enough for testing. The Air Force has worked out methods to "decompress" pilots after long VR training sessions. We're busy today, but if you want to try VR sometime, let us know.

MO

Thanks, but I have a tough enough time with just one reality.

Akarsh suddenly peers down the corridor, then positions himself near a decorative wrought iron fence that separates the main desk area from the entryway lounge--readying himself for something.

As Jean-Paul comes off the long corridor toward the main desk area, Akarsh takes two steps and does a quick parkour safety vault over the fence. He smiles at Jean-Paul and awaits approval.

JEAN-PAUL

Very good, Akarsh!

Akarsh beams.

AKARSH

I've been practicing.

JEAN-PAUL

Time for me to suit up.

Akarsh joins Jean-Paul and they walk together to the lab.

29 EXT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - PARKING LOT - DAY

Beatrice's car pulls into a space. She reaches to the passenger seat and grabs Tarina's Appaloosa bag. She thinks twice, then places the bag on the floor. She gets out of the car and heads for the entrance.

30 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RODRIGO'S OFFICE - DAY

Rodrigo sits relaxed in his glass-walled office behind a large desk with two computer monitors. Mo grabs a large chair from near the opposite wall, pulls it up to the desk. She sets her recording device on the desk, takes out an iPad, and sits down.

RODRIGO

How much do you know about E-sports
and virtual reality games?

MO

My last assignment was in a war
zone.

RODRIGO

Our world is similar. All the blood
and all the fun of war--but no body
count.

MO

Before we go too far--are there any
restrictions for this interview?

RODRIGO

Ask anything you want, print
anything you want--after the
launch. That's my only condition.

Mo nods.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)

All great inventions pass through
three stages, Ms. Gropman.
First, they're ridiculed. Second,
they are suddenly everywhere.
Third, everyone wishes they'd
invested early.

MO

Are there any IPO offers in the
works?

RODRIGO

An IPO is the goal of all ambitious
companies. Vasquez Virtual is no
exception.

31 IN MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - LEVEL 1

Jean-Paul appears on a shelf of black volcanic rock under a
harsh red sky. Rivers of lava crawl through jagged ravines. A
faint HUD (Heads-Up Display) flickers at the edge of his
vision--HEALTH: 100%.

Instantly two raptors close in on either side.

A shadow sweeps over him as a pterodactyl glides overhead.

At the same moment--

A T-Rex charges from the rocks behind him. As Jean-Paul leaps aside to avoid it, one of the raptors attacks. Jean-Paul launches off a rock and vaults over it, grabs it by the tail and slings it skimming across the rocks.

The pterodactyl drops swiftly toward him as the T-Rex attacks again. Jean-Paul runs three steps up a slanted rock wall, pushes off, and does a flip to land behind the charging T-Rex as it smashes through the rock where he stood.

As Jean-Paul comes down, he lands behind the second raptor. He snatches its tail and whips it up at the attacking pterodactyl--which jerks higher in retreat.

The T-Rex turns slowly again toward Jean-Paul, angry.

Jean-Paul smiles--ready for more.

32

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - EVENING

Low light. Wall-sized screens. Live feed from Oakland Arena.

Beatrice sits at a workstation. On the main display, Jean-Paul fights through Monster Planet Inferno--pretty easy for him at Level 1. On the far side of the room, Judy Wu works at another console, half in headphones, typing.

Beatrice opens the CONNECTIONS PANEL.

ACTIVE HAPTIC SUITS:

— JP-ALPHA
— PROTOTYPE 1

She stops, glances over at Judy. She clicks on "PROTOTYPE 1."

USER ID: T-ROX
IN-GAME: YES
LOGIN TIMESTAMP: 16:43
TOTAL SESSION TIME: 00:27
CONNECTION STATUS: DISCONNECTED
DEVICE: NONE
SHOW GAME

Beatrice is puzzled. She refreshes the screen. Same result. She goes over to Judy.

BEATRICE

Judy.

Judy pulls one earphone off.

JUDY

Yeah?

BEATRICE
C'mere a sec.

Judy gets up and follows Beatrice to the front door alcove.
Beatrice pulls her in close.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)
Tarina took the Prototype suit.

JUDY
What?

BEATRICE
I had Akarsh give her a tour, and
when we weren't looking she took
it.

JUDY
She *stole* it?

BEATRICE
Shhhh.

Judy lowers her voice.

JUDY
Where is it? Where's she?

BEATRICE
The Prototype suit is active.

JUDY
What are you talking about?

Beatrice guides Judy over to her workstation. She sits, pulls
up a chair for Judy. Points to the USER STATUS PANEL.

USER ID: T-ROX
IN-GAME: **YES**
LOGIN TIMESTAMP: 16:43
TOTAL SESSION TIME: 00:27
CONNECTION STATUS: **DISCONNECTED**
DEVICE: **NONE**
SHOW GAME

Judy leans in closer.

JUDY (CONT'D)
What the--. She can't be In-Game
and Disconnected. With Device =
None?

BEATRICE

I know.

JUDY

Is she in the game or not?

Beatrice takes a deep breath, and hits the "Show Game" button. The screen switches to the T-ROX game. The screen shifts into first-person gameplay. A slender game WAND rises into frame. The wand flicks forward. A puzzle node activates. Light fractures outward across her field of vision--geometric shards splintering the world.

BEATRICE

Okay, that's her...

JUDY

But where *is* she? Where's the suit?

BEATRICE

The suit is in my car. Where Tarina is, I have no idea.

JUDY

She's at home, playing the game.

BEATRICE

I went there. She logged in, yeah, but then--.

JUDY

Tarina could just be at another computer somewhere. Right?

BEATRICE

Let's go into the kitchen.

33

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - KITCHEN - EVENING

Beatrice and Judy stand close together at the window--no coffee cups, no food--in quiet conversation. All we hear, in a hushed tone, is:

BEATRICE

They said my sister just kept screaming...

Judy is concerned, but also puzzled.

34 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RODRIGO'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Mo sits across from Rodrigo.

MO
Speaking of the military--

RODRIGO
I wasn't aware we were.

MO
There are rumors you have ties to
DARPA.

RODRIGO
The visionary branch of the Defense
Department that *built* the Internet.
That made *everything* in this world
possible.

MO
Do you?

RODRIGO
And I don't mean just the game
world.

Mo fixes him with a stare that says she's not dropping this
question.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)
For security and confidentiality
reasons, I can't go into specifics
about investors or other
associations.

MO
Is the Defense Department an
investor in Vazquez Virtual?

RODRIGO
No, they're not. But our
technologies could be of great
interest to them for training
soldiers.

MO
But you have no current contracts
with them?

RODRIGO
Currently, no.
(changing tack)
(MORE)

RODRIGO (CONT'D)

As a seasoned journalist, Ms. Gropman, you must be aware that I have my reasons for granting this interview.

MO

Free PR for Vazquez Virtual.

RODRIGO

And I think we deserve it. We are, after all, the leading company in this arena.

(smiles at his play on words)

MO

One of. You are barely in the top ten.

RODRIGO

We are *in* the top ten. Do you have any idea how much money video games make? *Six times* what movies make. And after this evening, we will be the clear leader. Period.

MO

Why the need to keep everything secret until after the launch?

RODRIGO

People don't understand vision, Ms. Gropman, until they see its results. They mock. They ridicule. They say, "Man was not meant to fly."

(leans forward)

But at the same time, they *dream* of flying. And I...I make it *possible* for them to fly.

(appreciates his own words for a moment)

You can quote me on that. And for now, we're done. Feel free to interview my staff. But once Jean-Paul enters Level 3, no more interviews until the launch is over.

35 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - HALLWAY OUTSIDE RAFA'S OFFICE - DAY

Rafa sits at his desk inside his small corner office, with one large window. There are photos of sailboats on the walls. Mo appears in the open doorway, knocks lightly.

MO
Mr. Vasquez?

Rafa looks up.

MO (CONT'D)
I'm sure you're aware I'm putting
together a piece on the launch.

Rafa leans back slightly, hands folded.

RAFA
(ironic)
Oh? Do I get a sidebar in your
article?

MO
If you'd like one.

A mild snort.

RAFA
Not interested. And by the way, I'm
Rafa. Mr. Vasquez is in the glass-
walled office.

36 ON SCREEN - INFERNO (LEVEL 2)

Jean-Paul runs along a narrow rock ledge over a lake of churning lava.

A SHRIEK overhead--

A pterodactyl swoops down at him. Jean-Paul hits the ground like he's diving into home plate, and the pterodactyl's claws miss him by a foot.

It banks hard for another pass.

Two raptors spill onto the ridge behind him--and a T-Rex behind them. Another two raptors arrive in front of him to block his advance.

The pterodactyl SCREAMS--coming at him from the front now.

He presses tight against the cliff face so it misses him, then he spins quickly and grabs one of its feet with both of his hands, lifting him up off the ridge. He kicks an uppercut to the jaw of the first raptor, which slams into the one behind it, and both go over the edge--vanishing into the lava below.

Jean-Paul then does a lache--releasing his grip on the pterodactyl--arcing over the T-Rex's head and sliding down its back. It turns around and snaps its jaws at him, but he has already dropped to a second narrow ledge below. The T-Rex is too big and the ledge too narrow for it to jump down and follow.

37

INT. RAFA'S OFFICE - DAY

Rafa and Akarsh are in mid conversation. Beatrice appears in the doorway.

BEATRICE

Um, Akarsh? Could I talk with you
for a moment?

Rafa glances over.

RAFA

Something I can help with?

BEATRICE

No, thanks. It's...it's a hardware
issue.

Akarsh looks at her.

AKARSH

Something wrong?

BEATRICE

Could you just check the interface
on my workstation?

Rafa waves Akarsh on.

RAFA

Go ahead. I think we're done.
I was just ranting anyway.

Akarsh smiles and exits with Beatrice.

38 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Beatrice is showing Akarsh the USER STATUS PANEL.

USER ID: T-ROX
 IN-GAME: YES
 LOGIN TIMESTAMP: 16:43
 TOTAL SESSION TIME: 00:27
 CONNECTION STATUS: DISCONNECTED
 DEVICE: NONE
 SHOW GAME

AKARSH

This is Tarina? Yeah, something's buggy, alright. In-Game "Yes," Device "None" is just not possible. Wait...this is Prototype 1? I just checked all this yesterday, it was fine. And Prototype 1 is in the lab.

Beatrice sighs heavily.

BEATRICE

No, it's not.

AKARSH

Well, wherever it is, it's not connected, but...Tarina's in the game?

BEATRICE

Yes.

AKARSH

Did you check "Show Game"?

Not waiting for an answer, he clicks "Show Game." It again shows Tarina's POV. He clicks "Observer Mode."

IN T-ROX GAME

Tarina crosses a wide chamber where dozens of thin stone columns rise like a forest. But instead of Appaloosa skin, she now has VITILIGO skin.

Small glass spheres levitate between them, glowing softly. A small dark green dragon slips between the columns and pauses to watch her.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - BEATRICE'S DESK

BEATRICE

Oh my God!

AKARSH

What?

BEATRICE

Her avatar skin--it's *vitiligo*.

AKARSH

She's choosing vitiligo skin?

BEATRICE

No. There's no option for that. And that's her exact pattern in real life.

AKARSH

Damn.

BEATRICE

Yeah. Damn.

AKARSH

We have to tell Rodrigo.

BEATRICE

Tell him what? That my niece stole his haptic suit prototype? That she's missing, and she shows up with vitiligo in a game?

AKARSH

Point taken. But if it affects the launch, Rodrigo has to know.

Beatrice shakes her head.

39

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - MAIN FLOOR - NIGHT

A countdown graphic runs silently on a wall display. Across the floor, inside a glass-walled office overlooking everything, Rodrigo stands with his back to the room, on his phone. Akarsh moves to the closed door of the office, hesitates, then knocks. Beatrice spots him from her workstation.

BEATRICE

Shit.

As Akarsh opens the door, Beatrice hurries over, cuts him off, and goes into the office first.

40 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RODRIGO'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

BEATRICE

Rodrigo.

Rodrigo turns, annoyed. Akarsh comes into the office behind her.

RODRIGO

(on phone)

I'll call you back in five.

He ends the call.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)

(to Beatrice)

What's so fucking important in the middle of the launch you come barging into my office?

(to Akarsh)

And you--unless you've got something technical, you can turn your ass around too.

Akarsh covers his mouth, already sorry he entered.

41 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Mo leans with her back against the window, freshly made cappuccino in her hand. Judy rinses out a mug and gets a latte from the fancy machine.

MO

I'm kind of at a loss here. Rodrigo gave me carte blanche to interview all employees who are willing, but your PR person won't speak to me.

JUDY

Oh, yeah. Beatrice is usually very open. She especially likes to talk about T-ROX.

MO

The what do you call it--adventure game?

JUDY

It's a treasure hunt mystery game: T-ROX is her nickname for her niece: "Tarina Rocks." She wrote the game for her.

MO
But today she just tells me, "I
can't talk."

JUDY
Yeah, she got some really upsetting
news today.

MO
Hmm?

JUDY
I probably shouldn't tell you
this...

Mo smiles imperceptibly. Her best informants all start like
this.

42 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RAFA'S OFFICE - DAY

Mo knocks on Rafa's closed office door.

RAFA
Come in.

Mo opens the door, but doesn't enter.

MO
I know you don't want to be
interviewed, and I'll respect that.
But I had a question for Akarsh and
he's...indisposed.

RAFA
Question about...?

MO
Quantum computing.

RAFA
Close the door.

Mo closes the door, sits, pulls out her recorder.

MO
On or off the record?

RAFA
(firmly)
On.

Mo clicks on the recorder. Rafa doesn't wait for a prompt.

RAFA (CONT'D)

Quantum computing will no doubt be a boon to science. And certainly the military will figure out uses for it. But, like AI, it's highly unstable.

MO

Because it's not binary.

RAFA

Right. Unlike the on-off, yes-no of every other computer ever invented, quantum computers are more like yes-no-either-both-maybe-what-the-fuck.

MO

So they can make mistakes?

RAFA

Ha! Making mistakes is accepted--and *expected* as part of their design--in return for vast capabilities and quick computations. But only a fool would ever consider using it for virtual reality.

MO

Or a visionary?

RAFA

Only a fool.

He sighs.

RAFA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I should've just said no to this.

Mo clicks off her recorder.

MO

Love the sailboats.

RAFA

Only one's mine is the blue one. Just bought it this year.

MO

Congrats.

Rafa smiles.

RAFA
Well...back to work.

43 INT. DINER - EVENING

Mo sits alone at a small corner table. Plate empty except for a few potato chips. Tablet open. On her screen: a search bar. She munches a chip and types:

tarina clemmons t-rox

Gaming clips populate. She adds, bit by bit, thinking:

vasquez virtual prototype haptic suit

A new result appears.

"UNBOXING HAPTICS PROTOTYPE!! - T-ROX LIVE"

13 views, 4 likes. Mo clicks.

ON SCREEN - TARINA - The game title: "T-ROX."

TARINA (ON SCREEN)
Playin' my game with new tech today. My aunt works at Vasquez Virtual, so I get a sneak peak at this oh-so-cool shit. Comes out in three months for the rest o' you suckas. I'll put info on these amazing haptics in the description. Bazillion thanks to Akarsh Rao for letting me try it out. Okay, here goes...

"ENTER LEVEL 3" highlighted. Game music leaks from her headphones--volume cranked. Tarina hits ENTER, and her face erupts into a big smile for half a minute or so. Her mom enters the room--pissed--but Tarina is absorbed.

Mo, sensing something important when Charlisse enters the room, sets down the last potato chip and pays close attention.

CHARLISSE (O.S.)
Tarina! I TOLD you!

CHARLISSE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
SCREAMS.

Mo stares at the tablet for a long moment, then lets out a long breath she didn't realize she was holding.

She reaches for her coffee cup, but it's empty. Her eyes go back to the screen. Then she grabs her phone and dials.

MO

Jack? You were right. There's a story here. A big one.

CUT TO:

IN T-ROX WORLD

Tarina stands in a quiet courtyard garden enclosed by high stone walls. Pale trees with silver leaves grow from square pools of still water. The same small dragon stands calmly beside her.

Tarina's vitiligo patches have now spread to her lower legs.

44

INT. LOS ANGELES ARENA - NIGHT

Ken, Oliver, and Susan watching the spectacle. Susan lowers her MacBook Air, and looks angrily at Oliver.

SUSAN

Exactly which monsters in Midnight Mayhem did you give breasts to?

OLIVER

Which monsters do you think should have breasts?

SUSAN

I don't think any of them should have breasts. They're monsters.

KEN

Monsters can't be female?

OLIVER

Certainly the Pawns. Their job is to distract. With tits, they're very distracting.

SUSAN

I think the whole concept is dehumanizing.

KEN

(smiling)

But...they're not human.

SUSAN

To the *players*--not to the
monsters.

She grabs up her laptop and opens it again.

45

INT. RODRIGO'S GLASS-WALLED OFFICE - EVENING

Beatrice and Akarsh stand opposite Rodrigo, tense. Rodrigo leans back in his chair.

RODRIGO

Stop the game?
(he laughs loudly)
No way in hell.

AKARSH

There's something very wrong in
this game right now. If something
happens with Jean-Paul on the big
screen in the arena, it could be
embarrassing.

RODRIGO

Like what? He gets vitiligo?
(to Beatrice)
Sorry, no offense meant. Besides,
that's Tarina's game. Vitiligo,
Appaloosa...in Monster Planet
Inferno it would be a feature.

BEATRICE

Rod, my niece is missing.
(takes a deep breath)
My sister is in the psych ward.

RODRIGO

That's all very-- Look, I'm sorry
for whatever is going on with your
family, but we have a launch to do.
Back to work--both of you.

46

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - RODRIGO'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Rafa runs into the room, red-faced. Sensing something
important going on, Judy enters the room, then Mo.

RAFA

Alright, Rod, what exactly did you
do?

RODRIGO

What are you talking about?

Rafa gives Rodrigo the evil eye, then turns to the rest of the staff.

RAFA

Shortly after we started the launch, I saw a thin ripple pass across the interface.

Akarsh remembers it.

RAFA (CONT'D)

It looked like a video glitch.

Akarsh nods.

RAFA (CONT'D)

But something told me I should check it out.

BEATRICE

And?

RAFA

Our bandwidth jumped past our theoretical ceiling. We are now light-years past our computational limits.

AKARSH

In other words...
(figuring it out)
our system is doing things that are not possible.

Beatrice turns to Rodrigo.

BEATRICE

Rodrigo, what did you do?

Rodrigo hesitates. Then smiles.

RODRIGO

I took things to a whole new level.
Introduced a brand new...dimension.

Mo studies Rodrigo.

MO

There's a quantum computer involved, isn't there, Rodrigo?

AKARSH
 (to Rodrigo)
 Where would you get access to a
 quantum computer?

BEATRICE
 Stanford?

JUDY
 Berkeley.

AKARSH
 Those are research groups. Not
 national-scale clusters. DOE runs
 most of the big quantum facilities.

Mo steps closer.

MO
 And Department of
 Energy...collaborates with
 Department of Defense.
 (to Rodrigo)
 Rodrigo?

Rodrigo sits down in his chair, leans back, folds his hands
 behind his head. He tries in vain to contain his pride.

RODRIGO
 Los Alamos.

RAFA
 It's fucking visionary, isn't it?

47 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONFERENCE ROOM - NIGHT

Rafa and Judy have a gentle hand on each of Beatrice's
 shoulders. Akarsh joins them and stands next to Mo.

MO
 Rodrigo?

AKARSH
 He went to the lab to make sure he
 catches Jean-Paul starting Level
 Three.

Mo clicks her tongue.

MO
 Alright.

They gather around Mo as she plays the video of Tarina's live stream on her tablet. She pauses at the twenty-five second mark--then looks at Beatrice.

MO (CONT'D)
 What you're going to see next is
 very disturbing.
 (looks at Beatrice)
 Prepare yourself.

Mo hits the start button.

Tarina's mom enters the room--pissed--but Tarina is absorbed.

CHARLISSE (ON SCREEN)
 Tarina! I TOLD you!

On "TOLD," Charlissee smacks Tarina hard on the arm, and in that exact instant--

The haptic suit CRUMPLES to the floor--EMPTY. Tarina is GONE.

CHARLISSE SCREAMS.

Beatrice lets out a sharp involuntary yelp on an inhale. Rafa's hand tightens on her shoulder. Judy grabs her hand. Akarsh shifts his weight, swallows.

Beatrice's face contorts and she mouths the word "What?"--but no sound comes out.

Onscreen, the chat scrolls:

"wtf"
 "best teleport ever"
 "the mom sold it"
 "pretty cool - but it's AI."
 "seems real."
 "can't be, idiot"
 "acting sucked. screams not genuine."
 "AI"
 "deep fake"
 "fun tho"

48

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - MAIN LAB - NIGHT

Jean-Paul stands on the platform in the Helix haptic suit, poised for another attack. Vasquez Virtual staff are watching, plus Mo. Rodrigo is particularly engaged.

ON SCREEN - INFERNO - LEVEL 2

A FINAL WAVE closes in.

Jean-Paul moves smoothly--evading when necessary--taking the creatures out one by one.

He finishes the last creature. Then--

ON SCREEN TEXT:

"LEVEL 2 COMPLETE"

A rising tone--

The terrain dissolves and reloads into something harsher, more foreboding.

BACK TO LAB

Rodrigo watches intently.

RODRIGO

Here we go.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - LEVEL 3

Jean-Paul's HUD flickers--then disappears completely.

BACK TO LAB

RAFA

Where'd the HUD go?

RODRIGO

Things may go a little different in Level 3.

Rafa eyes Rodrigo suspiciously.

ON SCREEN - INFERNO (LEVEL 3)

Jean-Paul looks around, up, and to the sides.

JEAN-PAUL

Qu'est-ce que c'est? C'est le jeu, mais...

He looks at his hands--first one, then the other.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

Mes mains... elles sont réelles.

Two raptors appear ahead, plus one on either side.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)

(nervous)

Il me faut une arme.

BEATRICE
(confused)
He just said his hands are real.

Jean-Paul looks all around him, and behind. The only weapon is straight ahead--a golden epee hanging from a thin line between the raptors.

JEAN-PAUL
Merde.

ON SCREEN - INFERNO

Jean-Paul moves for the epee--

Two raptors lunge--cutting him off.

He pulls back--pivots.

Another raptor attacks from the side. Jean-Paul ducks--spins past it. The first two are already on him again.

A swipe--high. He leans back--barely avoids it.

No path to the weapon.

Jean-Paul breaks away, runs wide. The raptors track him--attacking from both sides now.

He plants, reverses direction, zigzags between them.

A claw lashes out--misses his shoulder by inches. Jean-Paul jumps, grabs the line, snatches the epee, and as he does, he lands hard on the ground.

He recovers just in time to thrust the epee through the chest of an attacking raptor.

The creature recoils, slumps. Jean-Paul manages to get back up just in time to slash the next raptor with the blade.

BACK IN THE LAB

Jean-Paul jerks to and fro as he fights, then suddenly--

THE SUIT CRUMPLES TO THE FLOOR--EMPTY.

Beatrice, Judy, and Mo shriek, almost in unison. Rafa and Akarsh gasp. Rodrigo puts his hand to his mouth.

AKARSH
What--

RAFA
the fuck--

RODRIGO
just happened?

MO
(points to monitor)
He's still there.

BEATRICE
(severely disturbed)
But he's not *here*.

ON SCREEN - INFERNO

Jean-Paul is still there--now with epee in hand, continuing his battle.

The wounded raptor staggers--but doesn't fall. It snaps back.

A claw flashes across Jean-Paul's side--rips through fabric and skin.

Jean-Paul CRIES OUT--in real pain. He stumbles back, clutches his side--

His hand comes away wet. BLOOD.

The other raptors close in.

Jean-Paul adjusts--protecting the wound now.

Fighting differently. Not for fun. For his life.

49 ARENA FLOOR - NIGHT

OLIVER
Excellent voice synthesis.

KEN
Really sounds like him.

SUSAN
En français, no less.

50 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LAB - NIGHT

Rodrigo eyes Mo.

RODRIGO
Do we want her in the room?

BEATRICE

It's because of her we know where
Tarina and Jean-Paul are.

RODRIGO

Alright. Akarsh--go ahead.

AKARSH

My theory is that Jean-Paul and
Tarina are where they are because
they don't know the real world
exists.

BEATRICE

What?!

AKARSH

We all know how real VR can feel.
But when the quantum computer came
into play--

RODRIGO

--and your haptic stack.

RAFA

The haptic stack wouldn't have done
this without the instability of the
quantum system.

Rodrigo raises a hand.

RODRIGO

Blaming isn't going to help.
(beat)
Continue.

AKARSH

Basically...their whole
consciousness was hijacked. Their
minds were so fully convinced they
were inside a game world...that
their bodies followed.

MO

But why did Tarina enter in twenty-
seven seconds...and Jean-Paul not
until he hit Level Three?

RODRIGO

Because I set the system to
initiate the quantum module at
Level Three.

Rafa shakes his head and shoots Rodrigo an accusatory look.

MO

And Tarina *started* at Level Three.

JUDY

(checking her screen)

Jean-Paul's log. He also...left, at twenty-seven seconds into Level Three.

RAFA

Talk about full immersion.

BEATRICE

So how do we get them back--

JUDY

If they can't even hear us?

MO

Don't even...know you exist.

51 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LAB - NIGHT

RAFA

We've got to get them out of there.

BEATRICE

How?

JUDY

Who do we rescue first?

BEATRICE

My girl is lost in another reality!

RAFA

Jean-Paul is in a dangerous place!

JUDY

But they're still just games, right?

RODRIGO

I'm sorry, Beatrice. Tarina is in a nice friendly place. Jean-Paul is in a violent one.

MO

And he's bleeding.

Beatrice shoots Mo a "shut-up" look.

RODRIGO
If these games--these places--are
real, Jean-Paul is the only one in
immediate danger.

Beatrice glares at him.

52 INT. LESHAWN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

KAT
Whoa, that was harsh!

LAURA
Blood?

DAVID
He sounds really hurt.

LESHAWN
No, he's okay.

KAT
That's his real voice, though.

MARCO
This is weird shit.

LESHAWN
(not sure)
He'll be okay.

53 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL LAB - NIGHT

RAFA
Okay, so we have to save Jean-Paul.
How?

BEATRICE
We don't even know where he is.

Rafa points to the monitor showing Jean-Paul playing Monster Planet Inferno.

RAFA
He's *there*.

JUDY
How do we get there?

AKARSH
Same way he did. Except we get out
before twenty-seven seconds.

RODRIGO
How do we get him back here?

AKARSH
We remind him there's a "back here"
to come to. First we weaken his
connection to that world, then we
remind him of his connection to
this one.

RODRIGO
Who goes?

Akarsh doesn't hesitate.

AKARSH
It's my idea. I go.

54 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LAB - CONTINUOUS

Akarsh pulls his haptic suit from its locker, puts it on.

RODRIGO
(to Rafa)
Go to Monster Planet Inferno.

RAFA
Login's up.

Akarsh steps over, enters his credentials. The MONSTER PLANET
INFERNO splash screen ignites across the monitor.

AKARSH
Okay, so I've got 27 seconds.

MO
Before you disappear.

BEATRICE
You have a real knack for blurting
out the scary shit.

MO
Sorry.

RODRIGO
No, it's good to remember. We will
not let you disappear. I'll set my
watch alarm for 22 seconds. If you
haven't brought Jean-Paul back yet
I'll signal Rafa to cut your
connection.

RAFA

Check.

Akarsh sighs with relief.

AKARSH

You just made this a little less scary. A little. Okay, when you see me get Jean-Paul's attention, start lowering his suit's input factor. Take it down to fifty percent. But only when he's not in immediate danger.

MO

Good luck with that.

(off Beatrice's look)

I mean--

BEATRICE

Then what? He'll just pop back into his suit here?

AKARSH

Something kept him in his body here for 27 seconds. We have to get him back into that zone. I'm hoping that the lowered input level will allow him to recognize me, and that recognition will shift his consciousness back to this world.

(to Beatrice)

That, yes--he'll reappear in the suit.

MO

Can you talk to him when he's in there?

BEATRICE

(with an edge)

Do you know how people usually communicate while playing a game?

MO

No.

Beatrice turns to Judy.

BEATRICE

Judy, hand me my coffee.

(to Mo)

Like that.

RAFA

But he'll be halfway in that world,
and it may be dangerous. He'll need
to focus. We should make every
effort *not* to communicate with him.

AKARSH

Yes, please. Just watch. Then lower
Jean-Paul's input level when you
see him connecting with me.

JUDY

If he does.

BEATRICE

(to Rodrigo)

And check your watch timer.

Rodrigo looks at Akarsh, holds up his watch.

RODRIGO

Twenty-two seconds, and you're out.

55

INT. ARENA - NIGHT

On the JUMBOTRON:

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul breaks from a swarm of dinosaurs--sprints across
broken rock. A steep rock face rises ahead--no path around.

He drives straight at it--one step, two--runs up the wall--
grabs high with his good hand--pulls--

The injured hand slips--he nearly falls, but--

He digs a foot into the rock, pushes--catches higher--hauls
himself up over the lip. A T-Rex SNAPS at him, but it can't
climb the cliff. Raptors gather at the base, searching for a
way around.

At the top, he slides hard on loose volcanic scree until he
falls off the far edge of the ridgetop.

He lands on a ledge, sees a dark opening--a low cave in the
rock cliff.

He ducks inside--just in time to avoid being spotted by a
pterodactyl sweeping past.

Jean-Paul steps deeper into the cave--enough space to stand.
Breathing hard. Alone for the first time.

Suddenly, the the sky RIPS open outside the cave--

Akarsh DROPS through and lands--weaponless--falling hard onto volcanic rock just outside the cave.

56 INT. ON THE ARENA FLOOR - EVENING

The audience is perplexed by the appearance of Akarsh in what is supposed to be a solo player game.

OLIVER
Who the heck is that guy?

KEN
Obviously not a monster.

OLIVER
This is a solo player game. What's he doing there?

SUSAN
There's no combat music spike. No hostile glow flares.

OLIVER
Whoever he is, he won't last long. He doesn't have a weapon.

KEN
Wait--I saw him on the floor today. He's Vasquez Virtual staff!

SUSAN
What kind of gimmick is this?

57 INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul spots Akarsh instantly. He breaks off a stalactite as a weapon and assumes a combat stance. Akarsh stands there--loose, unguarded. Jean-Paul shifts slightly, uncertain.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Rodrigo monitors his watch intently, his eyes only half on the computer screen action.

JUDY
Jean-Paul's engaging.

Beatrice grips the console.

MO

Akarsh doesn't look like a regular player.

JUDY

That's what we're hoping.

RAFA

Solo player mode, seeing another player with no weapon...

RODRIGO

It should at least confuse him, make him hesitate.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul levels the stalactite.

JUDY (O.S.)

Shit.

Jean-Paul advances--slow, measured.

AKARSH

Jean-Paul, it's me, Akarsh.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

MO

Can players normally talk like that?

RODRIGO

Quantum opens up new possibilities.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul swiftly raises the stalactite.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

JUDY

He's going to kill him!

BEATRICE

Do something!

RAFA
If we lower input too early--

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul stops three feet away. His eyes flick to Akarsh's empty hands.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Everyone frozen.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul lowers the stalactite.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Everyone exhales.

Rodrigo holds his watch up for all to see: 14 seconds changes to 13. Plenty of time.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul's expression hardens. That was just the windup.

He swings the stalactite with full force.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

RODRIGO
Now!

Rafa slams the input slider to 75%.

JUDY
Seventy-five percent.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul's stalactite, mid-arc, slows--like going through water. Confused, he struggles to force it--staring intently at Akarsh, who returns his gaze warmly.

Akarsh plants his hand on a small boulder next to him and does a parkour safety vault over it.

AKARSH
(smiles)
Safety vault. Like you taught me.

A flicker of recognition crosses Jean-Paul's face. He stops his swing.

JEAN-PAUL
Akarsh?

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Rodrigo looks at his watch.

RODRIGO
Seven seconds to go.

Then--

Suddenly a pterodactyl rips Akarsh from the ground. He struggles frantically and frees himself--only to fall into a lava pit. GONE.

A raptor trots up a cliffside trail and spots Jean-Paul. He prepares to defend himself, but the stalactite moves as if through water.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

RODRIGO (CONT'D)
One hundred percent! Now!

Rafa is already on it--slider to 100%.

BACK TO ARENA

ON THE JUMBOTRON

Jean-Paul gets his power back just in time to skewer the raptor with a blow that is not full force--but it hits a neck artery and that's enough. There is a hard look in his eyes: he is again 100% in Monster Planet Inferno.

IN THE ARENA

OLIVER
That was random.

SUSAN
I respect Rodrigo Vasquez as a
showman. But I don't always
understand him.

INTERCUT - VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

JUDY
Shit.

MO
(wrinkles her nose)
Ew.

They look at the platform and see putrid smoke coming off
Akarsh's fallen body through the haptic suit. Beatrice runs
from the room.

RAFA
Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Rodrigo's watch timer goes off: Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting!

58 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LAB - DAY

BEATRICE
Jean-Paul is still in trouble.

JUDY
We don't have any way to go in
there now.

RAFA
If anyone were even brave enough.

JUDY
Or crazy enough.

BEATRICE
We have to do something.

Rodrigo walks over to where Judy is sitting. He gently
touches her wig, then pulls it up off her head.

RAFA
Yes!

JUDY
What?

RODRIGO
We all know about BCIs, right?

Heads nod.

MO

No.

RODRIGO

Brain-computer interfaces. They allow paralyzed people to control computers directly with their thoughts.

MO

With their thoughts?

JUDY

Mine is to control epilepsy.

RAFA

It's an interface.

RODRIGO

I've read about your Deep Brain Stimulation system. It goes deeper than BCIs--into the thalamus, basal ganglia, limbic circuits. Deep Brain Stimulation has been known to cause out-of-body experiences. Which suggests it can affect *consciousness*--which I suspect somehow comes into play in Tarina's and Jean-Paul's disappearances into the game worlds.

RAFA

Along with using the quantum computer.

BEATRICE

What does all that mean? Can it help Judy get Tarina and Jean-Paul back?

RODRIGO

Honestly, I don't know. But I think it's our only chance. Except...

BEATRICE

Except?

RODRIGO

I don't know how to create the interface. That was Akarsh's area.

An uncomfortable hush comes over the room.

JUDY
Shit.

RODRIGO
Brother?

RAFA
Me?

59 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Rafa studies the system screen.

RAFA
Wait.
(beat)
We don't need to interface Judy
with the system.

RODRIGO
Yes, we have to.

RAFA
No. We can interface her with a
suit, and *it* connects to the
system.
(to Judy)
We just plug you into the suit.

JUDY
Use my brain if you can--my DBS--
but I am *not* going into that world.

RODRIGO
That's still an interface.

RAFA
But a much simpler one.

JUDY WU
Is anyone listening to me? I am *not*
going into that world!

RAFA VASQUEZ
You don't have to, Judy. The
interface I'll write won't allow
it. Not enough bandwidth.

JUDY
Even with the quantum?

RAFA

Yes. You'll be safe. You will *not* cross over. I guarantee it.

RODRIGO

We'll need a suit.

MO

Can you use Tarina's?

Rodrigo shakes his head.

RODRIGO

We can't.

MO

Why not?

Rafa turns the monitor toward them.

JUDY

Each suit has a user ID. It's like a return address. If we overwrite with a new user ID--

RAFA

We cut off Tarina's return. And we can't use Jean-Paul's because he'll need to come back through his.

Silence.

BEATRICE

So we have two suits, and we can't use either of them?

MO

Uhhh...you have *three* suits.

RAFA

She's right.

Everyone looks toward the platform.

JUDY

No.

All eyes on her.

RAFA

You don't have to even touch the suit. But you do have to cable up to it.

Judy struggles with the thought of being cabled to Akarsh's dead body.

JUDY
You're absolutely sure I won't go
anywhere?

RAFA
Not physically possible.

JUDY
Nobody thought it was possible for
Jean-Paul and Tarina.

She touches the DBS connector behind her ear.

RAFA
(calming)
It's just a signal bridge. You
won't be in there. They won't even
be able to see you. But you'll be
able to speak with them--I hope.

All eyes are on Judy--especially Beatrice's.

JUDY
I'll do it.

Beatrice relaxes, exhales, touches Judy's shoulder.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Okay, so I talk to Jean-Paul?

RAFA
No. If you talk, we'll be the only
ones to hear it.

JUDY
Exactly what am I connected to
anyway?

RODRIGO
This is a quantum system enhancing
a physical connection.

JUDY
(confused)
So I'll touch him?

RAFA
No, you won't be in that world.

RODRIGO
Talk to him in your mind.

MO
That doesn't seem possible.

RAFA
It might not be.

BEATRICE
Don't say that.

RODRIGO
If it *is* possible, it will be
because the quantum computer is
able to use the physical connection
between your brain and the system
to create a *bridge of*
consciousness.

RAFA
It's all we've got.

BEATRICE
Enough talking. Let's do it.

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - LAB - NIGHT

Akarsh's body still lies on the platform, crumpled inside the suit. Judy stands nearby with her wig off. Rafa is using cables from the suit to wire into a small black box, which then wires into Judy's DBS--into her head. The cables are only six feet long, and Judy must stand near the platform--near Akarsh.

Rodrigo watches the monitors. Mo stands beside Beatrice as she tracks Tarina in the T-ROX game on her tablet.

Judy suddenly retches, covering her mouth. Everyone looks at Akarsh's twisted body, then quickly away.

Rafa jumps up, yanks the huge MONSTER PLANET INFERNO banner off the wall, and throws it over Akarsh's body. He goes back to wiring up Judy.

Suddenly Beatrice sees something new on her tablet.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)
Oh my god!

Beatrice shows the tablet to Mo, who is standing next to her.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)
(to Mo)
Look!
(then to everyone)
Tarina just made a new door!

MO

She went through a new--

Beatrice shoves the tablet closer to Mo's face.

BEATRICE

(to Mo)

No!

(to all)

She *created* a door that's not in
the game--then walked through it!

Beatrice holds the tablet up for everyone to see.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

I didn't design that! Tarina made
it! We've got to stop her. We've
got to save her!

JUDY

But Jean-Paul--

BEATRICE

He's in a world he knows. We know
where he is. We know where he'll
be.

JUDY

It's violent.

BEATRICE

And he's the all-time champion.
(to Rodrigo)
Rodrigo, we've got to save my girl.

The room is silent as Rodrigo thinks for a moment.

RODRIGO

(to the room)

Tarina's world is quiet. No
dangerous creatures. No
distractions. If this technique
works, it'll only take a minute in
her world. Then we can go for Jean-
Paul.

MO

But...

BEATRICE

(to Mo)

You shut the fuck up.

(to all)

(MORE)

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

If we don't get her now, we have no idea where she'll even be in five minutes.

RODRIGO

Rafa, connect Judy to the T-ROX game.

Rafa hesitates.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)

Now.

Rafa nods and changes the game on the computer to T-ROX.

60

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - TECH FLOOR - DAY

Judy stands beside the platform, her DBS wired into the interface box. Rodrigo, Rafa, Beatrice, and Mo crowd the nearby console bank, watching.

JUDY WU

Ohhh. Hmmm.

BEATRICE

What? Something wrong?

JUDY WU

No, just...interesting. I feel something. Inside my head. It's like a low-grade hum.

BEATRICE

Are you alright?

RAFA

Should we stop?

Judy feels it for a moment.

JUDY WU

No, I'm okay.

Rodrigo cocks his head.

RODRIGO

Do you hear that?

RAFA

What?

Rodrigo turns up an audio volume slider on the console. There is a HUM.

JUDY

That's it. I hear that--inside my head.

BEATRICE

It means she's connected.

RAFA

Okay, now, how do we use that? How do we connect to the game?

RODRIGO

Not to the game. Directly to the Quantum Module.

RAFA

Direct human-to-quantum interface.

JUDY

I'll bet no one's ever done this before.

RAFA

Of course not. It's much too dange--

RODRIGO

Because no one ever *imagined* it was possible.

BEATRICE

Judy...

JUDY

It's okay. I know it could be dangerous. But we need to get them out. If I start to feel it's hurting me I'll say so.

RAFA

I'll wire you a panic button.

61 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

They watch the monitor--Tarina moves swiftly down a long black-walled corridor.

RODRIGO

Quiet your mind. Visualize Tarina.

JUDY

(uncertain)

Okay.

RODRIGO
Rafa, turn Tarina's input down to
50%.

Rafa moves the input slider.

On the monitor--Tarina moves now as if waist-deep in water.

A long moment passes. At last Judy frowns.

JUDY
I'm sorry, I can't see her. I can't
see her world, I can't--

She stops short, shocked. She cocks her head.

JUDY (CONT'D)
(confused)
I think I...

She puts a hand to her chest.

JUDY (CONT'D)
I think I feel her *heartbeat*.

They stare at Judy, unsure what that means.

BEATRICE
Look!

They all turn to the monitor and see Tarina stop and put a
hand to her own heart.

CUT TO:

IN TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina stops and braces a hand against the wall. Her other
hand is on her chest. For a moment she just stands there,
trying to understand what's happening.

TARINA
(under her breath)
What...?

She listens. She feels.

CUT TO:

RODRIGO
You've done it!

JUDY
Except...I don't know what I've
done. Or how I did it.

RAFA
Whatever it is, stay with it.

BEATRICE
You can do it, Judy.

IN TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina jerks her head as if trying to shake something loose.
Then she starts down the corridor again--a little faster now,
the resistance weakening.

JUDY (O.S.)
Stop!

Tarina pauses again, looks upward, turning her head from one
side to the other.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

JUDY (CONT'D)
(to Rodrigo)
I know you said talk in my head,
but--

RAFA
Do whatever feels natural. She's
responding.

BEATRICE
You talk to her, Judy. Keep her on
the line.

IN TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina starts down the corridor again--quicker now, as if
trying to escape something.

JUDY (O.S.)
Tarina!

Tarina stops. Again she looks around, in every direction.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

JUDY (CONT'D)
Tarina, this is Judy. We can get
you out.

Beatrice nods encouragement.

Judy mouths to Rodrigo: "How?"

Rafa gives Judy a thumbs-up. Rodrigo shrugs.

JUDY (CONT'D)
We can bring you back home.

BEATRICE
Come on, baby!

IN TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina again looks upward--toward the unseen voice. She
shakes her head No, slow and firm.

She pulls a wand from her belt, squats, and draws a circle
around herself on the floor.

A round hatch appears. It drops open and Tarina slides away
down a chute.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

MO
Oh, shit!

The others think Mo is reacting to the chute escape--but she
points to another monitor.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul stands, stunned, staring at his right hand--now
missing the little finger. The raptor that just removed it
slashes with its other claw, as Jean-Paul goes into a
backward roll to evade it.

As soon as he gets up, a T-Rex chases him straight toward a
sheer twenty-foot rock face. He takes one, two, three steps
up, grabs at the top--but the wrapped hand slips, and he
falls.

The T-Rex waits for him below.

Jean-Paul drops--scraping down the cliff face--then twists
mid-fall, gets a foot against the wall, and pushes off
outward.

He barely clears the T-Rex's head, lands in a forward roll, favoring his good hand, and scrambles away.

Behind him--the T-Rex chasing, a raptor attacking from the side, and a pterodactyl descending.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Beatrice gasps.

Rafa looks to Rodrigo, who nods instantly.

Rafa slams a command--the T-ROX game leaves the screen, and Judy is now connected to the Monster Planet Inferno world instead.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul, hand bleeding, runs full speed, seeking safety.

62

INT. ARENA - NERD SECTION - NIGHT

OLIVER

That injury style is new.

KEN

I don't think it really adds anything to the game.

SUSAN

It's kinda weird. Not in a good way.

OLIVER

It doesn't make sense. They're kicking the game up to a higher maturity rating.

KEN

They're gonna lose market share.

SUSAN

I don't play that kind of game, but if I did...I don't really think I'd wanna lose body parts.

KEN

Yeah. It's creepy. I'm starting to wonder whether Rodrigo knows what he's doing anymore.

63 INT. LESHAWN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The teens react to Jean-Paul's damaged hand.

LAURA

Eww!

KAT

(revulsion)

Ohhh. Nooo.

DAVID

What the hell is *that* for?

LESHAWN

That is not right.

MARCO

It's fucked up.

KAT

Why'd they do that to him?

Stan, looking very pale, gets up and goes to the kitchen.

DAVID

Is he okay?

LESHAWN

It's just a game.

LAURA

A fucked up game.

64 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

The Vasquez Virtual team are all present, as Mo joins them with a cup of tea.

RODRIGO

At least we know you can contact him, because you contacted Tarina.

RAFA

Right.

MO

But did she know it was *you*?

BEATRICE

(to Mo)

Stop, already!

(MORE)

BEATRICE (CONT'D)
(to the others)
Jean-Paul knew it was Akarsh.

RODRIGO
That was a different interface.

BEATRICE
(to Judy)
Tarina knew it was you. She ran away from you.

RODRIGO
She ran away from *something*.

RAFA
(to Judy)
Did Tarina know it was you?

Judy turns her palms up.

JUDY
I don't know.

Mo hands her cup of tea to Judy. Judy looks up at her.

MO
It's herbal.

Judy takes a long sip.

JUDY
Okay, ready.

Rafa adjusts the game volume down, and they again hear the HUM.

JUDY (CONT'D)
Hum. Got it.

BEATRICE
Heartbeat?

Judy listens.

JUDY
(softly, to herself)
Oh my God.
(to the others)
Yeah. Heartbeat. Fast. Loud.

They all look to the monitor to see if Jean-Paul shows any sign of feeling her heartbeat.

Rafa answers the unspoken question.

RAFA

In his present situation, he
wouldn't feel it.

RODRIGO

Until we slow him down.

RAFA

Which, in his present situation--

RODRIGO

We cannot do.

JUDY

Well, we've gotta do *something*.

Judy drains the rest of the cup of tea, and hands it back to Mo.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Here I go.

Judy watches Jean-Paul intently on the screen. As before, nothing at first. Then, after several seconds, her body begins doing little micro-twitches.

RODRIGO

(softly)

Oh yeah. They're connected, all
right.

JUDY

It's... it's like... electric.

They watch both Jean-Paul and Judy as he dodges creatures and deals them some blows.

MO

Her movements...they're--

RODRIGO

They're in sync with Jean-
Paul's.

MO (CONT'D)

In sync with Jean-Paul's.

RAFA

That's...interesting.

He stops himself from saying the word they were all thinking:
"scary."

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul walks along the bottom of a mesa, seemingly alone
for a moment.

65

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL LAB - EVENING

JUDY

Okay, I'm starting to feel his
rhythm. When I think he'll be safe
long enough for me to make contact,
I'll lower my hand--

(she lowers her hand)

--as a signal for you to turn down
his level. Then when I feel danger
approaching, I'll raise it.

(she raises it high)

She lowers her hand.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Looks like we have a break for a
moment.

But before Rafa can lower the input level--

ON SCREEN - INFERNO

A long-tailed pterosaur drops silently off the top of the
mesa--dives at him--talons going for his head--

He sees it at the last second and dives flat on the ground
against the mesa wall. The creature is forced to pull up to
avoid smashing into the ground.

As it swerves off, its tail whips around and SMACKS Jean-Paul
in the head.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy's head JERKS AROUND sharply. After a moment she collects
herself--a large red welt on her cheek.

JUDY (CONT'D)

(attempting lightness)

Or not.

She grabs the panic button Rafa made and places it directly
in front of her.

JUDY (CONT'D)

We may not have a lot of time
between hits. So let's just try to
keep getting in some two- or three-
second moments where I can speak to
him.

Rodrigo changes his monitor screen to a wider scale.

RODRIGO

I'll switch to wide view so you
don't have any more surprise
attacks.

JUDY

Good, thanks. I'll keep my narrow
view so I can focus. Maybe after
enough brief connections he'll
recognize me.

Judy follows Jean-Paul on the monitor--watching, and feeling
inward.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul moves through the chaos.

A raptor lunges.

Jean-Paul pivots at the exact same instant. The attack misses
him by inches.

Another raptor charges from the side.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy's body jerks left, then right--

The others watch helplessly as Judy twitches and jerks in
sync with Jean-Paul's movements.

She rises from the chair, places her legs apart and crouches
a bit--an easier stance from which to ride out the motion.
She moves the panic button to the edge of the desk--in easy
reach.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul fights for his life--ducking, twisting, leaping,
striking.

Attack. Twitch. Dodge. Turn. Vault.

For a brief moment the terrain opens around Jean-Paul.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy raises her hand.

RAFA

Got it.

Rafa dials Jean-Paul's level down.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Jean-Paul's movements slow slightly--just enough to steal a few seconds.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

JUDY

Jean-Paul. It's Judy. We're here with you. Listen to my voice. Jean-Paul.

ON SCREEN - MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Three new raptors now appear.

Jean-Paul turns to prepare for another attack--

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy quickly raises her hand. Rafa snaps the level back up.

She is sweating now.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Coffee.

She feels for the mug, starts to slide it toward Mo, who, attentive, grabs the handle, then--

WHAM!

Judy's body JERKS violently as Jean-Paul takes another blow. She staggers, barely keeping her footing, as the mug spins wildly across the desk.

Mo, shaken, retrieves the mug and scoots away.

Beatrice follows Mo out of the room.

66

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Mo holds Judy's mug shakily under the coffee machine.

MO

Do you know what kind of coffee she likes?

BEATRICE

Cappuccino.

Mo hits the cappuccino button.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

I think she'd like an extra shot.
The red button.

Mo hits the red button.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

It's kind of hard to watch.

MO

I've been in war zones. This is harder.

Mo grabs the finished cappuccino from the machine.

MO (CONT'D)

After she helps Jean-Paul get out,
she can go get Tarina.

Beatrice looks at her tablet, at T-ROX.

BEATRICE

This isn't even my game anymore.
It's not T-ROX. I don't know *where*
she is.

Mo looks at the tablet.

MO

She's a beautiful girl.

Mo's phone buzzes. She glances down at a text from her editor:

"Anything new on your fluff piece?"

She exhales a short, ironic pfft.

MO (CONT'D)

I better get this to Judy.

Mo flashes a small smile of encouragement to Beatrice and exits the kitchen.

67 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Mo sees Judy focusing intensely between being jerked to and fro with each one of Jean-Paul's blows or evasions. She pauses, cappuccino in hand--then downs it herself in two large gulps. She concentrates on the action in the game for a moment.

ON THE MONITOR

Jean-Paul darts between creatures--a T-Rex closing, another stomping across from behind to cut off his retreat, while two pterosaurs circle slowly overhead.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Beatrice joins Rodrigo and Mo in the room again.

MO

Forgive my ignorance,...but if you can change Jean-Paul's level, can you change a creature's level?

RAFA

Yes.

RODRIGO

And why didn't we think of it?

MO

I just had a moment of calm outside the room, that's all.

Rodrigo slides into a chair next to Rafa and pulls up a menu. They work in two teams now: Rafa and Judy focusing on Jean-Paul, and Rodrigo and Mo trying to change creature levels. Beatrice watches both teams anxiously.

ON SCREEN - HELIX LIVE INSTANCE MANAGER

A 3D tactical map of Monster Planet Inferno appears. Player telemetry. Enemy vectors. Health bars.

On the monitor feed beside it, Jean-Paul stands twenty yards from a T-Rex.

RODRIGO

Nearest T-Rex selected.

The T-Rex becomes highlighted in red--both in name and image.

BEATRICE
Maybe move it back behind that
mountain?

Rodrigo types, hits Enter. Coordinate numbers change.

MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

The T-Rex jerks to a sudden stop, but it doesn't move to behind the mountain. It twitches, looks angrily upward and GROWLS--as if at them.

Jean-Paul takes the opening--strikes the T-Rex hard in the face with a shield. The T-Rex looks at Jean-Paul, shakes off the blow, and moves toward him again.

Behind Jean-Paul, two pterosaurs drop lower, tracking him like vultures.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

RODRIGO
Fuck.

MO
It slowed him down.

BEATRICE
Again.

On the monitor--the T-Rex once again moves toward Jean-Paul. Rodrigo types coordinates and hits Enter.

MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

This time the T-Rex slows a little, as if knee-deep in water, then it glances upward, smiles, and continues forward as if stepping out of the water--back to full speed again.

Jean-Paul tries to retreat but a pterosaur swoops down in his path, forcing him sideways.

The T-Rex grabs Jean-Paul's shield in its jaws and rips it away.

Rodrigo types and hits Enter again. This time it has no effect whatsoever on the T-Rex.

The T-Rex lunges at Jean-Paul, forcing him into the path of a raptor, which swipes at him--but he swerves and rolls away just in time.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

RODRIGO

Dammit. I'll try lowering the T-Rex's aggression level.

Rodrigo types: 20%.

ON SCREEN - AGGRESSION LEVEL: 20%

The number holds for a second.

On the game feed, the T-Rex pauses mid-step. Jean-Paul lunges for the fallen shield--grabs it.

Then a thin ripple passes across the interface.

ON SCREEN - AGGRESSION LEVEL: 100%

The T-Rex surges forward again.

RODRIGO (CONT'D)

What the--

He types 20% again. Once again it holds, then the thin ripple, then back to 100%.

Rafa finds a moment to check in on what Rodrigo and Mo are doing.

RAFA

Slow the whole game down. Ten percent.

Rodrigo types: 0.01.

ON SCREEN - GLOBAL TIME SCALE: 0.01

Another ripple passes across the interface.

GLOBAL TIME SCALE: 1.0

INSIDE MONSTER PLANET INFERNO

Inside the game feed, everything moves at normal speed.

The T-Rex advances.

Jean-Paul runs up the face of a cliff, then scales another.

CUT TO:

VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

A small system line flashes at the bottom of the panel:

PRIMARY CLOCK RESTORED

It vanishes.

Rodrigo tries one more time to type. The interface does not accept his input at all--it is locked at 100%.

RODRIGO

Shit. It's almost like it's not a game, it's...

On the screen, the creatures are now closing from every direction--the T-Rex in front, raptors sealing off escape routes, pterosaurs ever threatening.

MO

A world.

BEATRICE

(scared)

Jeezus, don't call it that. It's just a game, not responding.

68

LESHAWN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The parkour teens watch the big screen as Jean-Paul takes another brutal hit. The excitement from earlier is gone. Now they're tense, unsettled, unsure what they're seeing.

On the screen: another blow lands, knocking Jean-Paul backward to the ground. LeShawn leans forward.

LESHAWN

C'mon, Mr. Mbengue! Don't give up!

DAVID

He'll just respawn, right?

No one answers. This suddenly feels too real. Kat covers her mouth.

KAT

I don't like this.

Stan returns from the bathroom.

STAN

Uh, guys? I think I'm gonna go home.

LAURA

No. You gotta stay and support Mr. Mbengue.

Kat reaches for the remote and lowers the volume a notch.

DAVID

It's just a game. Right?

Stan sits down but does not look at the screen. Marco hands him a bottle of water.

LESHAWN

(genuinely worried)
Mr. Mbengue.

69

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Monitors flash with Monster Planet Inferno gameplay. Jean-Paul--quite bloody now--is surrounded--creatures in close. He's taking hits.

JUDY

Too much chaos! It's hard to stay connected to him! I don't know if I can--

A heavy blow to Jean-Pauls' face--and thus to Judy's. Her bruises are getting worse.

JUDY (CONT'D)

(strained)
Fuck, this *hurts*!

Her head twitches. A large bruise appears on one eye--and a drop of blood. She reaches out and grabs the panic button--but she doesn't push it.

JUDY (CONT'D)

(desperate)
I could use some help in here!

BEATRICE

We've got to help her!

RAFA

How? We can't go in there with her. It's up to her.

Rodrigo puts two fingers of each hand to his temples, then:

RODRIGO
(intensely)
Let's get some gamers in there.

RAFA
What?

RODRIGO
Without suits, they're not real in that world. No haptics--they can't be hurt.

BEATRICE
What's the point?

RODRIGO
Diversion.

On screen, another creature lunges toward Jean-Paul.

RAFA
The creatures'll see the new players as intruders, and have to attack them.

RODRIGO
Exactly.
(beat)
Taking the heat off Jean-Paul.

A charged look between Rodrigo and Rafa.

BEATRICE
Who? What players?

RODRIGO
We've got a whole arena full.

MO
The Jumbotron.

RAFA
(to Rodrigo)
You're going public?

RODRIGO
We have to.
(to Beatrice)
PR is your job. Go for it.

Beatrice's hands are shaking. Mo drops into a console chair.

MO
Jumbotron message. You speak it,
I'll type it.

BEATRICE
(blurts out)
Jean-Paul needs help--or he'll die!

RODRIGO
Fuck.

Rodrigo and Rafa look at Beatrice, but Mo has already typed it. An ARENA FEED on an adjacent monitor shows the arena crowd goes quiet--and still.

MO
You've got their attention, that's
for sure.

BEATRICE
RAID! PULL AGGRO! SAVE JEAN-PAUL!

MO
"Aggro"?

Beatrice, now energized, yanks Mo out of the chair and types it herself:

"RAID! PULL AGGRO! SAVE JEAN-PAUL!"

70 INT. OAKLAND ARENA - NIGHT

The JUMBOTRON cycles through the following.

JEAN-PAUL NEEDS HELP--OR HE'LL DIE!
RAID! PULL AGGRO! SAVE JEAN-PAUL!
CHECK YOUR DEVICE!

Phones begin lighting up across the stadium--tablets and laptops too.

CUT TO:

71 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

MO
Is there any incentive you can
offer?

Beatrice types:

"FREE HELIX INFINITY Version 7.0! Coming out next month!"

CUT TO:

72

INT. OAKLAND ARENA - NIGHT

PHONES VIBRATE.

A QR CODE fills the lower third of the screen. The JUMBOTRON cycles, as Oliver, Ken, and Susan look up.

JEAN-PAUL NEEDS HELP--OR HE'LL DIE!
RAID! PULL AGGRO! SAVE JEAN-PAUL!
CHECK YOUR DEVICE!
FREE HELIX INFINITY 7.0!

OLIVER
A little melodramatic, don't you think?

KEN
Free Infinity Seven? I'm in!

He grabs his tablet. Susan pulls her MacBook Air out of a carrying case, eager for the challenge.

SUSAN
Excellent P.R. move, Rodrigo.

Oliver quickly takes his large laptop from its case.

The JUMBOTRON blazes:

JEAN-PAUL NEEDS HELP - OR HE'LL DIE!
RAID! PULL AGGRO! SAVE JEAN-PAUL!
GRAB A DEMO HEADSET!

KEN
"Grab a demo headset?"

OLIVER
They're supposed to be raffled.

Susan dashes quickly toward the headset display table. After a moment's hesitation, Oliver and Ken follow.

A long row of display tables is lined with 100 DEMO VR HEADSETS. The two SECURITY GUARDS see the advancing gamers, and brace themselves.

Susan vaults the low steel barrier fence. Guard #1 holds up his hand, overconfident.

SECURITY GUARD #1
Back off, Missy!

Susan snatches his outstretched hand--hooks two fingers and bends them sharply back.

The guard drops to one knee with a gasp--

She lets go instantly, already moving past him, grabbing a headset. She tosses two others back to Ken and Oliver over the guard's head.

Security Guard #2 laughs at his buddy's failure, then he himself is engulfed by a swarm of gamers.

Security Guard #1 stands up, looks briefly back at the rush of nerds at the demo table, then walks slowly away.

SECURITY
They don't pay me enough for this
shit.

The first wave of gamers are already back in their seats, fumbling the headsets on, powering them up, logging in on laptops and tablets.

73

INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Jean-Paul staggers, barely holding his ground. Dazed, he's confused when he sees several other players appear in the game.

Suddenly a new player materializes nearby--LeShawn. Jean-Paul doesn't understand who this is--but he knows it's help.

Without hesitation, LeShawn launches into a parkour vault over a fallen rock slab, lands beside Jean-Paul, and instantly cleaves an attacking raptor with his axe.

A spark of confused half-recognition shows in Jean-Paul's eyes as he and LeShawn, side by side, simultaneously dispatch attacking creatures.

More players begin spawning around the game space--some closer to Jean-Paul, others farther away. But they all see the same thing--Jean-Paul is surrounded by attackers and must be saved.

They start moving--fighting their way over to him.

Axes flash. Spears thrust. Swords hack. Creatures fall left and right.

Jean-Paul fights beside LeShawn, still wary, still moving-- but the pressure begins to ease.

74 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Everyone stares at the screens. Player icons are appearing everywhere.

RODRIGO
They're coming.

BEATRICE
Oh my God...

RAFA
They're actually doing it!

75 INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

More players arrive.

Ken as a Star Wars stormtrooper. Oliver as a tall tree-like creature wielding knives in its branches.

Susan, a giantess in black, with gold armor plates, wields a huge sword, instantly slicing the head off a T-Rex.

Players begin migrating more and more toward Jean-Paul.

The chaotic swarm gradually forms a defensive ring around him, two players deep, with Kat among those on the outer edge.

76 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

With no monsters within twenty yards of Jean-Paul now, Rafa turns down Jean-Paul's input level.

RAFA
Lowering activity level to 60%.

Rodrigo watches the monitor.

RODRIGO
Good.

JUDY
Jean-Paul!

Jean-Paul suddenly pauses. He cocks his head to one side, looks slightly upward--then turns his attention back to the creatures on the other side of the protective cordon.

RODRIGO
(to Rafa)
Go to 40.

Rafa moves the slider to 40%.

JUDY
Jean-Paul! It's me, Judy!

Jean-Paul looks back up toward the sky.

JEAN-PAUL
Judy?

77 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy stands rigid, eyes closed, concentrating.

JUDY
Yes, Jean-Paul. It's me.

She sets down the panic button, slides it a few inches away.

78 INT. LESHAWN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

LeShawn and Kat, headsets on, play Monster Planet Inferno as the other teens watch. Laura has a bowl of chips in her lap.

DAVID
Who's Jean-Paul talking to? Who's Judy?

STAN
I still don't understand who that Indian dude was.

MARCO
(to Laura)
Hey, man, don't hog the chips.

Laura absentmindedly sets the bowl down on the other side of her--away from Marco, who strains to reach it.

STAN
He didn't have an avatar. He was just some random guy.

MARCO

Chips!

LAURA

Everybody chill--watch Kat and
LeShawn.

Marco grabs up the chips.

MARCO

This is getting good now!

79

INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Jean-Paul turns slowly, looks at LeShawn.

JEAN-PAUL

(uncertainly)

Ce garçon?

JUDY (V.O.)

Jean-Paul.

He glances around, and up above.

JEAN-PAUL

Où es-tu?

The protective ring around Jean-Paul is now three players thick, and growing. There is only minimal fighting around the outer rim. He stops moving, stands still, catching his breath.

JUDY (V.O.)

Jean-Paul...relax.

He looks around again and thinks maybe he can afford to relax.

But then--

CREATURE SPAWN.

A new wave of raptors erupts from the ground.

80

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

A panicked Rafa quickly raises Jean-Paul's level back up.

MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

LeShawn charges forward.

Jean-Paul watches as a raptor claw slashes LeShawn in the chest and he vanishes.

81 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

A large monitor shows a PLAYER LOGIN MAP.

Dots appear across the country.

SAN FRANCISCO, OAKLAND, LOS ANGELES, SEATTLE, DALLAS,
CHICAGO, NEW YORK

Then--

A bright dot appears overseas: PARIS. Fans of Jean-Paul.

MO

People everywhere are logging in.

BEATRICE

They saw the stream.

82 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

ON THE MONITOR

The circle around Jean-Paul thickens to three players deep again--then four.

Feeling confident again, Rafa moves the slider down.

MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Kat leaves the outer ring and makes her way to Jean-Paul in the eye of the hurricane.

She smiles at him and he half recognizes her.

KAT

We got you, Mr. Mbengue!

83 INT. ARENA - NIGHT

The arena crowd watches the massive screens. When they see the player numbers surging--and Jean-Paul safe--

THE CROWD ROARS.

JUDY (V.O.)
Jean-Paul!

He reacts--looks up. Nothing there.

JUDY (V.O.)
Don't move.

JEAN-PAUL
Judy? Où es-tu?

The cordon around Jean-Paul is four players thick now, and being attacked less, as creatures must spread through the landscape to fight more and more new players. Jean-Paul takes a deep breath, looks at his hand with the missing finger.

84 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Rafa adjusts controls--down to 30%.

JUDY
Jean-Paul, remember us. Vasquez
Virtual. Rodrigo, Rafa. Beatrice,
Judy, Akarsh. Hayward, California.
Paris, Oakland. You belong here
with us!

On the monitor, they see this seems familiar to Jean-Paul, but he still can't quite remember.

RODRIGO
Go to 20%.

Rafa takes a big inhale, then moves the slider.

CUT TO:

85 INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Jean-Paul is motionless. He realizes he is in the eye of the hurricane--finally safe.

JUDY
Jean-Paul! Come back to us.

He looks once again for the source of Judy's voice.

CUT TO:

86

INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

JUDY
(to Rafa)
Zero percent.

Rafa hesitates, looks at Rodrigo.

JUDY (CONT'D)
This is our moment.

Everyone checks the protective ring around Jean-Paul.

Rafa slides the level to 0%.

BEATRICE
(quiet, almost
involuntary)
Oh, Jesus.

RODRIGO
Go, Judy! Go!

BEATRICE
(to herself)
It's a dream.
(to Judy)
Tell him: C'est un rêve.

Judy relays the message with a bad accent, but understandable.

JUDY
C'est un rêve.

BEATRICE
Ce monde, c'est un rêve.

JUDY
Ce monde, c'est un rêve.

BEATRICE
Souviens-toi!

JUDY
Souviens-toi! California! Oakland.
Parkour! LeShawn! Kat! Um,
um,...Laura! Stan! Rodrigo! Rafa!
Judy! Beatrice. Judy!

Jean-Paul remembers her now, definitely.

JEAN-PAUL
Judy.

JUDY

Yes! Judy! Come back to us, Jean-Paul!

BEATRICE

Reviens!

JUDY

Reviens! Judy, Beatrice, Rafa, Tarina, Akarsh, LeShawn, Kat, Stan, LeShawn, Kat, parkour in the park on Saturday...
(she continues, frantic)

CUT TO:

87 INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Remembering his life, Jean-Paul smiles. Then sees his bloody hand--feels the pain, both physical and emotional. He looks up, places his good hand on his heart, focusing, breathing full and steady.

The HUM grows louder. A look of peace on his face. Then--

CUT TO:

88 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

SHOOM! Jean-Paul's suit inflates as his body instantly fills it.

RAFA

Fuck!

RODRIGO

Holy shit!

BEATRICE

He's back!

JUDY

You're back!

Judy rushes over to Jean-Paul--the connecting cables ripping out as she goes. She hugs him. He lets out a long breath--then breaks down sobbing.

JEAN-PAUL

Merci! Merci, Judy! Merci, merci!

He looks around, sees everyone.

JEAN-PAUL (CONT'D)
 Merci, tout le monde! Merci!
 C'était l'enfer. I am so happy to
 see all of you once again.

He sobs again.

BEATRICE
 (translating)
 "It was hell."

Jean-Paul stops sobbing. As Judy hugs him, he breathes in and out--long, slow breaths. Judy slowly, gently, turns him to face away from the banner covering Akarsh's body.

89 INT. MONSTER PLANET INFERNO - RAID

Kat and the other players around Jean-Paul remain in place--their backs toward the space he occupied a moment ago. Most of the creatures are in other areas now.

LeShawn spawns near the edge of the game space, axe in hand. He looks around. Seeing Jean-Paul is nowhere in sight, he exits the game.

Meanwhile--

KEN, OLIVER, SUSAN, and dozens of other players continue fighting monsters, in the thick of it--just having fun.

90 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Jean-Paul sits, still shaking, now wearing Beatrice's sweater. Someone has bandaged his hand. He stares ahead, breathing soft and slow.

Judy sits beside him. Bruised, exhausted. Holding his good hand in hers.

Beatrice watches Jean-Paul--relieved, but also nervous.

RODRIGO
 Mo, please call 911. Then take Jean-Paul to the lounge to wait for the paramedics.

MO
 You got it.

Rafa and Mo help Jean-Paul stand up, as Judy sits and rests. Mo leads Jean-Paul to the entrance lobby.

RODRIGO

Judy?

Judy closes her eyes a moment, then opens them.

JUDY

Right. Tarina.

She rises, then moves to the console and sits down.

JUDY (CONT'D)

Where's that coffee I asked for?

BEATRICE

I'll get you another one.

JUDY

Double shot.

Beatrice heads out of the room, as Judy and Rafa establish themselves once again at the console. Rafa plugs the yanked-out cables back in to Judy's DBS and switches the game to T-ROX.

91 INT. CAVERN - TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina walks up to a mossy black stone wall that disappears above into blackness.

She stops, closes her eyes, places her hands on the wall. She moves her wand up against the wall in an arc, then back down toward the floor.

The circumscribed stones in the wall crumble into a pile of black sand at her feet.

Beyond the door is a wide tunnel with no ceiling. A vague light appears from above.

Birds squawk somewhere ahead. The little dragon looks up at her.

TARINA

(smiles)

Sure. Why not?

As she steps through the opening--

JUDY (O.S.)

Tarina!

Tarina pauses. Maybe she heard it, maybe not.

She puts her palm out for the parakeet on her shoulder. It steps onto her palm, she extends her arm forward, and the parakeet flies forth. Tarina follows. She looks at the dragon--now two feet high--as if it were always that size.

92 VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Judy leans in, very focused now.

JUDY

She heard me. I know she heard me.
I can feel it.

Rafa has his hand on the activity level slider.

RAFA

I had her activity at 50%.

BEATRICE

Try again. You saved Jean-Paul, you
can save Tarina.

93 EXT. TARINA'S WORLD

The tunnel has become a grassy path between two shoulder-height stone walls. Tarina walks along it, the parakeet and the dragon leading the way.

94 VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

BEATRICE

Save my girl, Judy.

Judy grabs her coffee, takes a long gulp.

JUDY

Okay. We can do this. Rafa?

RAFA

She's in a safe world. Moving her
activity level down to 20%.

BEATRICE

Not zero?

RAFA

Freezing her might freak her out.
Twenty percent should slow down her
energy and her mind enough to let
Judy come through loud and clear.

95 EXT. TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina emerges from a wide stone tunnel into a vast valley. A light blue sky hangs above--a warm sun, a few passing clouds. As Tarina looks at them, trees with copper trunks begin to gently sway. The parakeet lands in one, joining a yellow bird with brown patches already there. The dragon strides to the grassy bank of a stream to take a drink. Tarina spots a small footbridge of copper-colored wood and walks toward it. Beyond the stream stands a grassy hill with a winding path upward of copper cobblestones.

96 INT. VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

Rafa lowers the level to 20%.

RAFA
...and 20%.

JUDY
(urgently)
Tarina, sweetheart! Stop, listen to me.

97 EXT. TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina's body slows down, like walking through water.

She drops into a crouch--then launches upward, spinning hard and fast, like a ballerina.

CUT TO:

98 VASQUEZ VIRTUAL - CONTROL ROOM

WHOOSH!

Judy is violently whipped around--a full 360--and nearly thrown out of her chair.

Beatrice catches her and stops the spin.

RAFA
Jesus!

RODRIGO
I thought you dropped her power level.

RAFA
I did.

Judy regains focus. She stands up.

JUDY
Tarina.

TARINA
(recognizing)
Judy.

JUDY
(relieved)
Yes, it's me. We can bring you
home.

TARINA
I *am* home.

Beatrice moves to stand behind Judy, hovering close. Her hands on Judy's shoulders, she watches Tarina on the monitor.

Tarina's eyes light up.

TARINA (CONT'D)
(tender)
Ohhhh. I feel my Aunt Beatrice.

Beatrice smiles hopefully.

TARINA (CONT'D)
Aunt Beatrice, thank you ever so
much for this world--for your love.

Beatrice is suddenly jerked close to Judy's body, as if receiving a hug from Tarina through Judy. It's odd, but she savors it.

TARINA (CONT'D)
But now I must go.

Fear flickers across Beatrice's face.

TARINA (CONT'D)
I will always remember you.

BEATRICE
No!

ON SCREEN - TARINA'S WORLD

Tarina throws her arms upward, as if tossing something up into the sky. A shower of copper static particles falls down across the screen, obscuring her and then the landscape.

The screen goes all copper, then black, then flips back to the USER INFO menu.

```

USER ID: T-ROX
IN-GAME: YES
LOGIN TIMESTAMP: 16:43
TOTAL SESSION TIME: 00:27
CONNECTION STATUS: DISCONNECTED
DEVICE: NONE
SHOW GAME

```

Suddenly the information changes. (NOTE: Data in RED are what changed.)

```

USER ID: T-ROX
IN-GAME: NO
LOGIN TIMESTAMP: 00:00
TOTAL SESSION TIME: 00:00
CONNECTION STATUS: DISCONNECTED
DEVICE: NONE
SHOW GAME

```

Then the screen goes black again.

A new prompt appears, with a blinking cursor:

ENTER USER ID: ____

RAFA

Shit.

The rest of the room is silent. Tears stream down Beatrice's face. Rodrigo steps to her and gently puts an arm on her shoulder. She stands rigid, unconsolable.

99

ON SCREEN - TARINA'S WORLD

At the top of the hill, a copper-colored wooden footbridge stretches sixty feet out at a slight upward angle into a clear blue sky--ending in nothing.

Tarina, the parakeet flying above her, walks out on the bridge. At the end stands a small copper pedestal tilted ever so slightly downward toward a dark blue abyss--an obviously fake ocean with whitecaps that do not move.

The dragon follows her out to the end and peers over the edge. A small wind comes up. The dragon looks at her, opens its wings. The wind catches them--lifting its body, but not quite taking it off the ground.

Tarina looks down at the abyss, uneasy.

TARINA
(uncertain)
You think so?

The dragon watches the parakeet fly out over the fake ocean, then turns back to Tarina. Another breeze comes up, and the dragon rises on the wind, flicks its tail and soars off the end of the bridge.

Tarina gasps and rushes forward, looking down to see the dragon bounce once on a single white cloud drifting past below, then come safely and comfortably to rest.

Relief spreads across her face.

Tarina steps onto the pedestal. A sudden gust of wind rattles the narrow bridge as the cloud drifts slowly out of reach.

Tarina bites her lip, then blows out, then inhales--and jumps.

She lands safely near the edge of the cloud--but no bounce. She starts to slowly sink through it--grabbing at white nothingness--then drops out the bottom.

Tarina tumbles through open sky--then stabilizes herself in a spreadeagle position like a skydiver. She releases all fear, and simply watches as the fake ocean comes closer. Real wind rushes past her face.

Suddenly the whitecaps begin to move. Slowly at first. Then faster. The surface of the water shifts and swells into real waves.

Tarina orients herself into a dive position--and enters the water flawlessly.

100

EXT. UNDERWATER - DAY

SPLASH! Tarina enters the water amid a froth of bubbles and instantly she is an orange and gold mermaid with a long graceful tail. She is quickly greeted by a half dozen dolphins, who start a game of jumping over each other as they crest the surface, again and again.

After several jumps, Tarina pauses on the surface and looks up at the sky. She dives again and swims powerfully--six strong swishes of her tail--then rockets upward.

101 EXT. OCEAN SURFACE - DAY

Tarina bursts from the water--and glides high above the surface. Below her, the dolphins rise upright on their tails and back-swim away from her, clicking and squeaking.

Then--just as her momentum peaks and she starts to drop--her tail splits. Feathers explode outward along her arms.

Her body reshapes in mid flight--half girl, half magnificent thunderbird, feathers patterned in bright blue and green.

Her wings catch the wind, and she soars upward. Below her, the endless ocean. Ahead, open sky.

Tarina laughs with joy as she climbs higher and higher into the clouds.

102 INT. STUDIO - DAY

J.C. and Jae sit side-by-side at an anchor desk. Graphics flash behind them.

J.C.

Hey, J.C. and Jae here!

JAE

Jae and J.C.! Bringing you the hottest news in VR today!

J.C.

Rodrigo Vasquez became a billionaire yesterday.

JAE

And you did not.

J.C.

My turn is coming. Vasquez Virtual--maker of the Helix Infinity game system--had their IPO yesterday.

JAE

Making Rodrigo Vasquez--

J.C.

and his brother Rafael?

JAE

--the richest guys in the VR world.

J.C.

We were at their spectacle last week at the Oakland Arena, and I gotta say, they earned every dollar.

JAE

Rodrigo engineered a PR coup by working the crowd into a frenzy.

J.C.

Until they stormed the hardware table, snatched up fresh Helix Infinity headsets and joined the game en masse. There were some glitches, though.

JAE

More likely, PR gems.

J.C.

With Vasquez, I'm never quite sure.

JAE

Like who was the random Indian guy?

J.C.

My sources say that was their haptics engineer.

JAE

Can't wait to see his final haptic stack, coming out next month.

J.C.

The real factor in their success was the brilliant idea to connect Helix Infinity to a *quantum computer*.

JAE

That's right, effing quantum computing is what made that game seem hyper-real to the arena players.

J.C.

When the haptic stack is available, that should take it to a whole new level.

JAE

AI, quantum...they're the future of VR, no doubt.

J.C.
Rodrigo Vasquez got there first.

JAE
By the way, who's Judy?

J.C.
Don't know. Don't care.

JAE
Jean-Paul was amazing as always.

J.C.
Sad about his parkour accident.

JAE
Poor Jean-Paul lost a finger, and Vasquez apparently incorporated the accident into the show.

J.C.
I think it was in poor taste, but Jean-Paul must've gone along with it.

JAE
What a trooper.

J.C.
"You gotta save Jean-Paul or he'll die." Hilarious!

JAE
Yeah, but it worked!

J.C.
And now Rodrigo is a billionaire.

JAE
And you're not.

J.C.
Workin' on it.

103 INT. JACK'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jack and Mo finish watching the J.C. and Jae Show on his computer. He turns to her.

JACK

People at the arena say they shook hands with Jean-Paul and his hand was just fine--there was no parkour accident. One of our interns found a deepfake video of Tarina Dillingham wearing a Vasquez haptic suit, then she disappears. Her aunt works for Vasquez, and her mother's in the nuthouse. Is there something you're not telling me?

MO

Yeah, Jack. There's a lot I'm not telling you. And you wouldn't believe me if I did.

JACK

Where's their engineer, Akarsh Rao?

MO

They said he went to India to visit family.

JACK

Where's Jean-Paul?

MO

Resting up.

JACK

Bullshit. Anyway, people are commenting. I'd love a follow-up piece. The girl. Her mother. The aunt. Rao. Jean-Paul. Rafael. Rodrigo.

MO

Sorry, Jack, can't do it. These people are my friends now. I don't write about friends.

JACK

Journalists have no friends. You know that.

MO

Well, I feel like I do.

104

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY

The parkour teens practice various moves--vaults, rolls, quick runs, Stan on the horizontal bar again.

Jean-Paul approaches, one hand bandaged.

David spots him first.

DAVID
Hey, Mr. Bengue!

The kids all run over to greet him.

JEAN-PAUL
(smiling)
Mmm-Bengue.

MARCO
Where you been, Mr. Mbengue?
LeShawn said he called you but you
didn't answer.

LeShawn waves Marco off.

LESHAWN
Mr. Mbengue, we're so glad to have
you back with us.

KAT
That game was some crazy shit, huh?

JEAN-PAUL
Very crazy shit. Someday I will
tell you. But today, we do parkour!

He puts his good hand out for fist bumps. They hit it one by
one and walk-skip over to their training area.

THE END