The Echo Trials

Three Adventures

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Echoes of the Impossible

Chapter 1: The Ball That Was Not a Ball

The ball rolled into a bare patch of mud and stopped in front of Jamie. If he left it where it was, Tom would have to run over and fetch it. If he kicked it, there was a fair chance Tom would have to run all the way to the hedge.

“Back here,” Tom called. He was standing less than six feet away. Even Jamie could see he’d done that on purpose.

“I was going to help Sam mark the goals.”

Sam held up the jumper he’d already put down for a goalpost. “I’m managing.”

Jamie set his left foot beside the ball, as they’d been shown in PE. The ground was soft, and his foot sank rather deeper than he’d expected. When he swung his right leg he was leaning so far back that for a moment he could see the sky instead of the ball.

There was a tremendous crack. Jamie straightened up in time to see the ball go through the low clouds. A circle of blue opened where it had gone up, then closed.

Tom shaded his eyes with his hand. “That can’t have been you.”

“Thanks.”

They waited. Jamie was doing the sums on how much a new ball might cost when a tremor ran under the field. The railings along the edge of the playground rang. Sam’s jumper lifted at one corner. Then something came straight down out of the clouds and hit the mud between Jamie’s shoes.

It was the size of their football and it had the same scuffed patch where Tom had tried to draw his initials. The rest of it was silver and moved like a puddle in the wind. Marks travelled slowly round it. Jamie bent his knees to see if he could make out the initials.

“Leave it,” said Sam.

The ball rolled towards his hand. He could have snatched his fingers away. Instead he put a palm on top to stop it getting past him. For the first time all afternoon, something he reached for went exactly where he meant it to go.

The mud tipped up. He grabbed a fistful of grass and came away with bright blue blades between his fingers.

He stood. Purple sky. Floating islands with earth showing through their undersides. On the nearest one a row of little trees grew along a sheer edge, their leaves blowing towards him over the drop. Somewhere far away, someone was playing the same three notes and getting the last one wrong.

“Welcome, player,” said a voice behind him.

The figure wore robes that changed colour every time they moved. One hand held a long staff with a light passing up and down inside it, like a lift in a glass shaft. Jamie tried to look them in the eye and found tiny points of light where their pupils ought to be.

“You’ve been chosen for the Impossible Game,” they said.

Jamie looked down at the ball. Its silver skin was pulling tight over the scuff he’d recognised. He tried to put his foot on it. It rolled neatly out of reach.

“Right,” he said. “How do I get back?”

Chapter 2: The Rules of the Impossible Game

The figure glanced towards the floating islands. “The game puts you through to the next place when you clear a round.”

“I meant back to school.”

“For that, you’ll have to play it through.”

Jamie waited for the rest. The figure prodded the grass with the staff, and one by one the blades sank into a sheet of white marble. Towers rose along its edges. Several curved towards each other, but the gaps between them filled with hoops of light. The lowest hoop was above the level of the crossbar in the school gym. Jamie had never managed to hit that either.

“The Arena of the Chosen,” said the figure. “Send the ball through any hoop.”

“Does it have to be with my feet?”

“Use what you like.”

Jamie picked up the ball. It had the weight of a wet football, with a surface that dipped just a little where his fingers pressed. He turned it over, looking for the place it had split. There wasn’t one. He tried to picture Tom throwing the ball in after it went out, both hands above his head. If