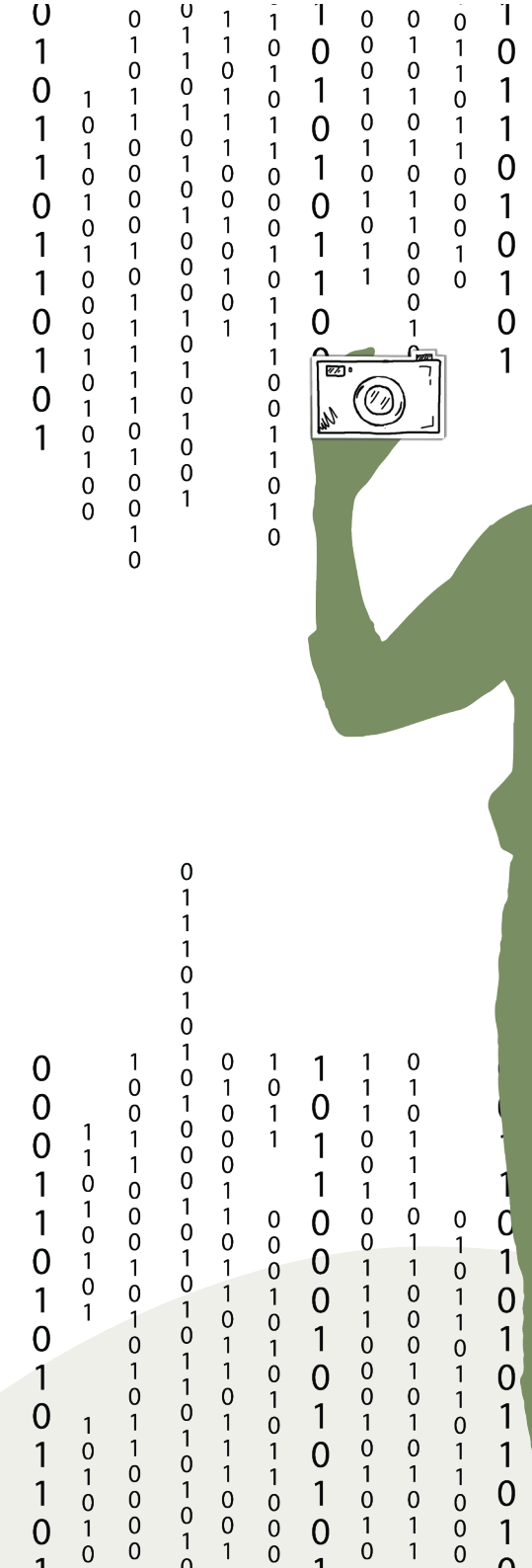
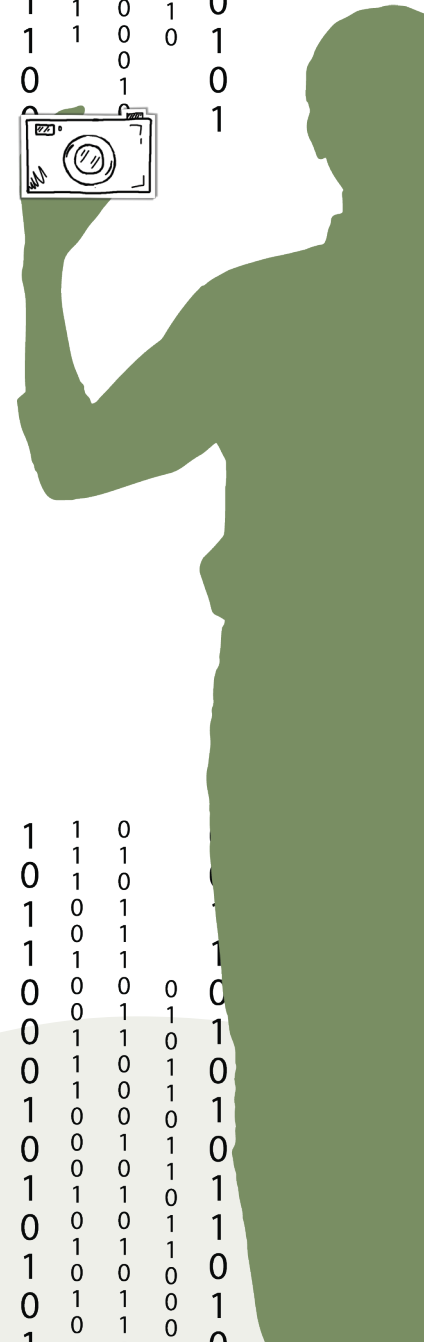


THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN <VIRTUAL> RACE



THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN <VIRTUAL> RACE

Too young for reality TV but want a shot at fame and glory?

Great at challenges but stuck at home?

Are you an expert on anthems, flags and symbols?

Enter now for your chance to compete in the first ever Great Australian <Virtual> Race.

Prologue

Scroll ... click. Scroll ... click. Scroll ... click.

If Jacko hadn't startled you with a loud bark at some distant cat cry, you would have kept scrolling. You would have missed it.

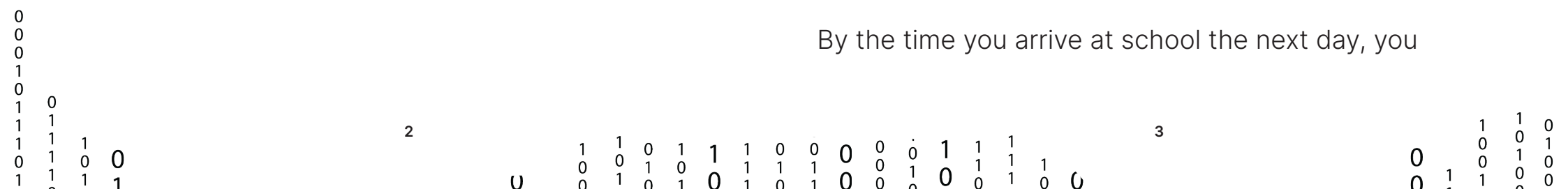
It's a school night but your homework is mostly done. So you're sprawled on the couch with Jacko at your feet, mindlessly scrolling through your feed.

'Settle, Jacko. It's just a cat.' You return to the screen and you see it:

You click on the link and the page bursts to life on your phone. This looks amazing! You read it – fast the first time and then once your heart rate settles, you read it again properly. The Great Australian <Virtual> Race is a virtual race around Australia with team challenges and great prizes. You keep scrolling and scanning - searching for the vital piece of information that has kept you out of every other competition - the age requirements: Participants must be over 12 years of age to enter.

'Yes!' You startle Jacko, who had only just settled again.

By the time you arrive at school the next day, you



have assembled your team. Two of them were easy to convince. In response to your link to the competition website, Ruby sent just two words: I'm in! You know that Ruby's insane memory for facts is one skillset you need on the team. You also suspect that her gaming skills might come in handy - or at least her competitive nature.

Beau hadn't replied straight away because he was working on a playlist for his sister's birthday next weekend. He is obsessed with music. His headphones are permanently connected and some body part is always tapping - a foot, a hand, a knee. Recently he's been experimenting with mixing instruments traditionally used by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into other music. It is pretty amazing. But once he saw the message, he was in too.

Amari took longer to convince. He is a year below you and the others but he is tall. Everyone thinks he'd be great at basketball but the truth is, he hates sports. His passion is art. His sketches are incredible. But he's quiet and prefers to keep to himself, so you had to work a lot harder to get him to agree. You got there in the end -

after way too many messages and a whole lot of charm. Now you just hope he doesn't change his mind. Ruby, Beau, Amari and you as captain. The Dream Team!

'So, there are three main categories and they are all about Australian symbols,' you explain to the team as you eat lunch outside the art room. 'Anthems, flags and other symbols.'

Your phone vibrates in your pocket. Absent-mindedly, you pull it out and continue talking. 'We start next Friday. Beau, you're on anthems. Amari, you're flags and ...' You look at your phone.

A message from an unknown number: *Quit now, losers!*

You look up and see the rest of your team looking at their phones too.

'Losers? That's not very creative,' Beau laughs.

You laugh too but you can't ignore the worry that rises in your chest.

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Chapter 1

When Beau walks into your kitchen, you can hear the tinny drumbeats blaring out from his headphones.

'Hey,' he says a little too loudly as he sits down beside you at the table. He slips the headphones down around his neck and the music stops.

'Hey,' you reply. 'Ready?'

Beau nods his head. It's not as enthusiastic as you had hoped. He looks like he's about to say something but then quickly closes his mouth and stares down at his lap.

'Everything okay?' you ask.

'Yeah. It's just ... I got another message this morning.'

'Same number?' you question, remembering again the text you all received last week. Your worry starts bubbling up again.

Beau has his phone in his hand now. He nods. 'Same number. It says: You will not succeed. I will make sure of it.'

With more confidence than you feel you say, 'How much damage can they do? It's online. They can't hurt us. It's just someone trying to put us off.'

'Maybe. But how did they get my number?'

'I don't know,' you admit. 'Maybe someone from school found out we entered and they're just trying to put us off. Take it as a compliment – they think we're a threat!'

Beau shrugs and swivels in his seat to focus properly on your laptop screen. You've already logged into the game. 'Let's do this,' he says. 'How does it work?'

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You read the instructions aloud:

The competition consists of three challenge rounds. Only two team members are permitted to participate at a time. Each round must be completed successfully to gain entry into the final stage of the Great Australian <Virtual> Race.

You move the mouse to the start button and click.

Beau reads: Round 1 is all about the Australian National Anthem. Read the information and then answer the questions.

Suddenly the screen goes black and a message flashes: *YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED.*

But then it disappears and the screen returns to normal. It all happens so fast, you actually wonder if you imagined it.

You and Beau stare at the screen. 'Did you see ...?' you both say at the same time.

Your heart is racing but everything looks normal now. You let go of the breath you've been holding. Then you notice something odd. Some of the words have been removed. There are blank spaces all over the screen.

'Yep,' Beau says. 'We've been hacked.'

'Well I don't know about you, but I'm not quitting. We'll just have to fix the mistakes as we go. Are you with me?'

'I'm in. Let's do this!' Beau says.

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You finish the challenge and close the laptop. Beau is looking up – his eyes darting around with his swirling thoughts.

Finally he speaks. 'When I put the playlist together for my sister's party, I had to make sure I had songs in there that everyone would like. Imagine trying to pick just one song for the whole of Australia!'

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warming up. 'That's a great start.'

'Nah, you're good now,' you say, opening your laptop and sitting down beside him.

'They're oil pastels,' Amari says flatly.

'What?'

'You said crayons.' He holds up his dirty fingers. 'They're pastels. Brighter than crayons. Great for drawing bold colours ... real artists use them!'

'Also good for face painting apparently!' You're both laughing now. The awkwardness is gone.

As you log onto the competition website, Amari starts spouting facts about the flags of the world. 'Did you know that Nepal is the only country whose flag is not a quadrilateral? It has two triangles joined together. There are also two square flags but the rest are rectangular. And every country's flag is the same on the front and back except for one – Paraguay.'

You're genuinely impressed – impressed with his knowledge and equally impressed by your own genius idea to include him on your team. 'I knew you were the right team member for this challenge Amari!'

'Yes this knowledge makes me very popular at parties,' he says sarcastically, smiling.

But his smile vanishes as your laptop screen flashes and the bright homepage is replaced by that same sinister warning: *YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED!*

Instinctively, you pull your hands back from the keyboard and glance at Amari. His face gives nothing away. When you turn back to the screen the warning is gone.

Your mobile phone vibrates loudly on the desk and you jump. You open the message and read aloud, 'Stop now or else! Get the picture? Hahahahaha.'

'Get the picture? What does that–' Amari stops mid-sentence. All of the bright images that had previously filled the screen are now fading before your eyes,

leaving gaping holes where the picture should be.

'No, we don't get the picture. Not a single one,' Amari says.

'There's no way we can answer questions about flags if we can't see them. I don't know about you, but I think this changes things. It's impossible, right? Ugh, I hate giving up on things. It's not my style, but what else can we do?.'

You reach out to close your laptop but Amari stops you. 'I think we should keep going. I really do know a lot about flags. Take a look.'

Amari opens his sketchbook and starts flicking through the pages. Colour explodes from neat rectangles filled with lines and stars and crescents and crosses. They're flags. His whole sketchbook is filled with beautiful flags.

'You know flags,' you say in an impressed whisper. 'You really know flags.'

'Come on. Let's play,' Amari says confidently.

Dragging your eyes away from the flag sketches, you click start.

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As you sit back in your seat, Amari closes his sketchbook and runs his hands gently across the grainy, black cover.

'I know it doesn't seem cool or popular, but I really thought I wanted to become a vexillographer,' he says quietly.

'What's a vexiol ... a vexicolo ...?'

'A vexillographer. They design flags,' Amari explains.

'You'd be amazing at that!'

'Now I'm not so sure. Flags are important. They're not just decorations. They're so much more than shapes and colours. They have meaning. They carry centuries of history. They tell the story of people and pride. They're about belonging and believing. That's a lot of

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Chapter 3

At first, you don't see Ruby when you walk into her darkened room. You can't see anything except the glow of an enormous monitor sitting on her desk. As your eyes adjust, you see her silhouette in front of the screen.

'There's a guy with a crown beside me,' Ruby says, calmly.

'What? Where?' you ask. There's no one else in the room.

'Calm down bro!' Ruby says, aggressively.

'What do you mean calm down? You're the one yelling!'

You move closer to where she is sitting.

'How did you get over there? Did you slide through?' Ruby asks.

'What? Ruby, no. I didn't slide through. I just walked through the door and—' You reach out and touch Ruby's shoulder. She screams and spins around in her swivel chair pulling off her headset, leaving her character to fend for herself in some other dimension.

'You scared me half to death!' she yells at you.

'Yeah, well you were talking about some guy with a crown. You were freaking me out!'

Ruby turns back to face her monitor and quits the game she's been playing. She flicks the button on a desk lamp and light fills the room. You both blink to adjust.

'You are seriously addicted to that game, Ruby.'

Ruby shrugs. 'It's a whole lot safer than this competition you've got us into.'

'So you got the messages too?' you ask quietly.

'Yep. One word at a time, each one delivered exactly on the hour.' Ruby reads the string of messages, a little robotically, as she scrolls through the one-word texts.

'Stop. Playing. Now. And. Everything. Will. Be. Fine.'

'Ruby,' you continue, a little more softly this time, 'I will totally understand if you don't want to play.'

'Are you kidding me? This is fantastic! Game on!'

Ruby logs into the competition site on her enormous gaming computer. Everything Ruby does is fast and accurate – typing, navigating, clicking, scrolling. She does everything twice as fast as you. Even your eyes have trouble keeping up.

Neither of you are surprised when the screen blacks out and the words *YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED* appear.

'Here we go,' Ruby whispers. In a flash, her fingers are flying over the keyboard and a new window launches. But Ruby is fast and quickly minimises the window

before you can read the screen. You think you see the word 'trace' or 'track' - you couldn't be sure.

'Ruby, what are you doing?' you ask, accusingly.

'Nothing to worry about. It might not even work.' She's brushing you off.

By now, the warning screen has disappeared and is replaced with the title of this challenge: National Symbols of Australia. But just as you go to read the instructions, the letters start spinning like combination locks. Every letter spins until nothing makes sense. Every word on the page is encrypted.

You sigh. 'Oh Ruby. We made it through the first two rounds against the odds. But this is next level. How are we going to answer the questions in this challenge if we can't read the words?'

But Ruby doesn't even seem to be listening. She's reciting the alphabet and counting the letters on her fingers. Finally, she claps her hands and makes two fists.

competition are using the same local network. which means—'

You cut her off, finally understanding. 'The Hacker is part of the game!'

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Epilogue

You huddle around your laptop and wait for the livestream to start.

‘Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Chekar, the host of The Great Australian <Virtual> Race. The only reason you have made it this far is that you are excellent at solving puzzles. So many of you will have already rearranged the letters of my name and realised that I am also Hacker.’

You and Ruby nod at each other knowingly.

Chekar continues, ‘Not only have you demonstrated

excellent knowledge of Australia’s national symbols, you have also solved every problem and challenge I’ve thrown at you these past few days. So congratulations! Your team is through to the final phase of the competition.’

‘Yes!’ Ruby is making those happy little fists again.

‘The race is virtual so you will play online. All instructions will be given in the game but I can promise you now – there will be no more hacking.’

‘Thank goodness,’ sighs Beau beside you.

You will need to use all of the knowledge you’ve learnt through the three rounds to complete the race. But the clock will be counting down. Good luck.’

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