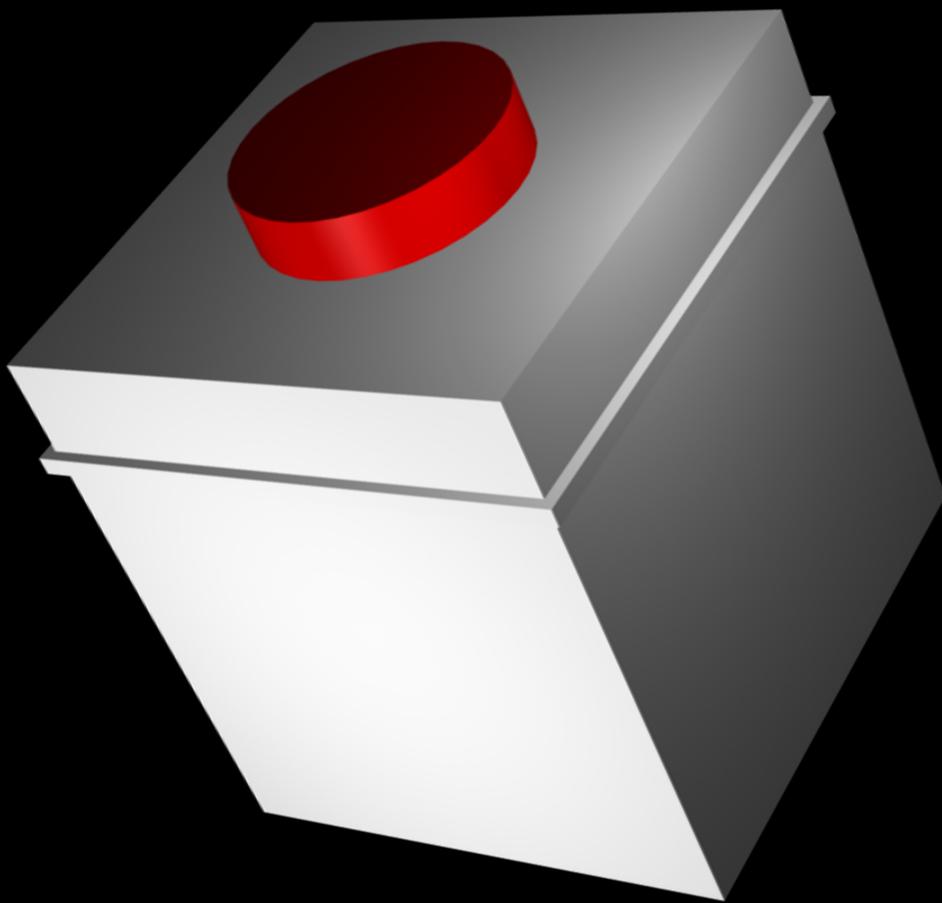


FUTURE GENERATIONS



THE FINAL MISSION

Future Generations

The Final Mission

Chris didn't recognize many of the faces. Most were strangers, and the people that he did know, they weren't from his generation.

It had been nearly two years since Tessa passed, and she was the last. At least, Chris thought, the last before him. At ninety-eight years old, Chris Ember had been retired for over twenty years. A fact, he had to keep reminding himself, not to dwell on. He missed the adventure.

Every year, the Mission Park Celebratory got a little smaller. The last active member of Team Mission Park was Tessa's granddaughter, Libby Faux, and even she opted to go solo, as most modern heroes were doing. Chris quickly did the math. Libby hadn't made an appearance at the Celebratory in five years.

Shaking his head back and forth, the painful truth was obvious. Nobody was left. Victor and Valerie were killed in the line of duty nearly fifty years ago, in an epic struggle against a psychopath named Crowd.

Timothy Note passed a few years before Tessa. A car accident. It was a death unexpected, tragic, and senseless.

Perhaps the loss that hit the team the hardest was Apple Orchard. She died at only twenty-nine, fighting The Collector. Tessa was never the same after her death, and for that matter, neither was the rest of the team.

Chris was about ready to go, back home to Monica, who urged him to skip the Celebratory. If only he had listened, he could have avoided bolting over. It wasn't as

easy for him to use his powers these days. Like clay half hardened, transforming was difficult.

The Celebratory felt more like a memorial, and the people in attendance, more like historians eager to learn about the classic age of heroes. If anything, the whole event made Chris feel more out of touch, more ancient than he already was.

Deep in thought, Chris found himself caught off guard when a slender man in an absurdly dated hat approached him and extended his hand.

"Excuse me, but you're Chris Ember? Right?"

Chris turned, smiled, and shook the man's hand.

"Yes, I am. What's your name... Or, no, I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"Uh, Charles. And no. No, we haven't. But I think I might have something of interest to give you. If you're willing."

Already, Chris was skeptical. A lifetime of crime-fighting had jaded him. But at the same time, he was curious. And he really did miss the adventure. The best way to get answers was to play it cool. A technique that had worked for Chris since the beginning of his career.

"I've reached a point in my life when mysteries are no longer exciting. So, if you have something you think will interest me, you're best just telling me."

Charles smiled.

"I wanted to bring you this."

As he spoke, he held up a small white box with a bright red button on top. Then he handed it to Chris.

"What is it?"

Chris turned the box over, examining the other side.

"It's a new beginning. I've been working on it for years. The science is perfect. You push that button, everything resets."

"resets?"

"Oh, yes. Completely! I'm sorry, I'm not explaining this well. The reset happens regardless, obviously, but what if you could remember just a few tiny things? Things to change. Nothing major, of course, it's not a time machine. But like a dream that fades after you wake up, what if you could remember the slightest of details? Just enough to fix a mistake. If you could, you'd be happy, I promise. It'd be like a second chance, but better, because you already have the second change, this just lets you remember."

Charles paused, thinking, before continuing.

"But of course, you won't remember anything at all. Not really. And things could be entirely different, and none of it will matter. Your greatest love could come back a villain for all I know."

"I think I'm confused."

The man sighed, explaining as simply as he could.

"I don't know how I could make it any clearer. Just say you'll take it. That you'll push the button. That you'll right the wrongs of the past."

Chris was still confused, and unsure of how to respond. Charles understood, and it was time for him to go.

"I know you'll make the right choice."

With that, Charles walked away, leaving Chris alone with the box.

Not sure what to do next, Chris looked around the room one more time, spotting Tori Tallatetto near the back wall. A member of the High Heel Samurai, and eventually, a member of Team Mission Park, Tori was a friend, and Chris needed to talk to a friend.

It all sounded so silly. But for whatever reason, Chris was intrigued. What if the box could offer them one last adventure? One last Mission. Chris walked up to Tori. She turned around, eyes wide, happy to see her old friend.

"What would you say to a Guerrieri round?"

Tori smiled.

"I'd say that you should take it up with my granddaughter.

"Where's Antonio?"

"Back home. And Monica?"

"The same."

"To be honest, I'm surprised I'm here. After Mia, I thought I'd never go to one of these again. Is it just me, or does this whole event feel like... Well, death?"

"I think you captured the energy."

Tori nodded knowingly.

"What's with the box?"

Chris looked down, momentarily forgetting that he was still holding the box that Charles gave him.

"It's so strange. That man..."

Chris looked around the room, realizing that Charles was nowhere to be found.

"Well, he must have left. A man came up to me just a few minutes ago, gave me this box, and said that if I pushed this button, everything could change. I don't really

know what he was talking about, but I have the feeling that he wanted me to use it to bring back Team Mission Park."

"If only that were possible. We've lost too many friends."

"We've also had our victories. We wouldn't want to tamper with those."

Chris further examined the box. He noticed a latch near the top. If he could open it, maybe he'd get some answers by learning how it works.

Twisting the top, the box separated in two.

Chris and Tori peered inside, disappointed to find it empty, and the button connected to nothing.

"It looks like this was someone's attempt at humor."

Chris tightened the lid back on the box.

"It would seem that way, yes."

Chris smiled.

"But it does make you think... If you could go back... Do it all again? Would you?"

"It depends. Do I know everything that I know now? Or do I just go back?"

"According to Charles, you don't know anything. Except for the slightest of imprints. Enough to change one, maybe two big mistakes."

"Then I suppose I'd rather take my chances with the next great adventure."

"Now, what exactly does that mean?"

Tori smiled. Chris smiled back. And then he turned his attention back to the box.

"Since it doesn't matter, I'm pushing it. There are a few tragic moments I'd like to correct. Maybe the slightest warning is enough."

"Then I wish you good luck, Original Man of Fire."

Readying himself, Chris pushed the button, and just as expected, nothing happened. Chris and Tori stood standing, in the middle of the function room at a lifeless event, the world unchanged.

"Well, do you feel different?"

"Not at all."

Chris sighed, looking down at the box.

"There really is no going back."

Sensing Chris' disappointment, Tori offered a comforting thought.

"I don't know, Chris. One time, long ago, Valerie Sarah once told me about the second start."

"Never heard of it."

"She said that this whole universe will one day snap backwards, into a single point, before re-expanding. An all new big bang. An infinite loop. With each expansion, dead worlds return, maybe not exactly the same, but evolved. For all we know the box does work, and when we come around the loop again, you'll be ready!"

"An interesting theory. But that's all it is."

Tori nodded in agreement.

"You take care of yourself, Samurai Girl."

"You too, Chris."

The heroes said their goodbyes, and headed for home.

Perhaps it was the box, or perhaps it wasn't. That day, or an eternity later, the great contraction enveloped everything, towards a single point.

The energy grew in strength, and in a burst of fantastic light the universe exploded into an all new existence.

This world, alive once more. Time reset.

The same? Not exactly. Entirely different? No. Renewed, with endless possibilities? Without a doubt.

**TO BE CONTINUED
IN THE ALL NEW PWC UNIVERSE**