

Part One

Chapter 1

Bran

Running away in the dead of night isn't fun. It was impossible to see more than a foot in front of me, and the tiny glimmers of moonlight that flickered through the trees barely helped. In any normal situation, I wouldn't be outside at this time of day. But having to stay in a place where Dad's entire existence had been trampled on kept me from turning around. I'd rather die in a ditch than spend another night in that house. Not that it'd be my house for much longer anyways.

When I made it far enough away from the house, I reached down to turn on the flashlight. The paint was peeling off in places, and a long scratch ran down the length of the handle. Dad used it whenever he worked on one of his many home improvement projects, and after I'd inherited it, I never left the house without it. That's why it'd gotten so banged up. Right before I flicked the switch, a beam of light from a different flashlight shined through the forest. "Bran! Bran, please come back. We still need to talk." It was Mom's voice. By how out of breath she sounded, she must've sprinted the entire way here. I didn't exactly leave the house quietly. I thought I had a bit more time. Whatever. Losing that advantage wasn't a huge deal. Not when I knew the forest like the back of my hand and they didn't. I switched on my flashlight, and a bouncing cone of light cut through the gloom of the forest to reveal the way forwards.

"Honey, I see a flashlight over there. Bran, is that you?" A feeling of dread sank into the pit of my stomach. That grease stain of a human being that wanted to force himself into my life. The piece of poop on the bottom of my shoe that convinced Mom to move to the city. It was Kevin's voice, and it was embarrassingly close.

I turned into a human blur that streaked through the trees, brushed away branches, splashed through puddles, and jumped over bushes. Mom and Kevin's voices faded into muffles before disappearing altogether. As I moved deeper into the forest, I

recognized familiar landmarks - the tree with the crooked branch, the small stream with the boulder in the middle, the lone tree stump with the huge hole that termites had dug out. When I ducked underneath the tree with the drooping branch, I found it.

“Secret base, thank you for existing,” I whispered.

Even though I called it a secret base, it was nothing more than a hole in the ground. But it was my safe haven. It served as my hideout whenever I wanted to escape from the world. The hole was shallow enough for me to easily get in and out, but deep and wide enough to rest and relax. The only other person who knew about this place besides me was Cassie. She helped me clear out all the leaves and twigs when we first discovered the hole by pure accident five years ago. The two of us spent hours reading and playing board games and planning our next expeditions of the forest together. Remembering all those moments made me forget, for at least a second, today’s stinging moment of betrayal, one more painful than any bee sting or snake bite.

The good news is that Cassie would understand my predicament. I’d hide out here for the night, then in the morning I’d crash in her room while we figured out what to do next. Maybe we’d run away together. Go take a cross-country trip through all the forests and mountains and valleys I’d dreamed of exploring when I was older. The possibilities were endless. I hopped in the hole feet first. With how many times I’d gone through the motions, I didn’t even glance down. The only thought on my mind was about getting some well-deserved rest.

And that’s why I didn’t immediately notice the moment when my world turned upside down.

I braced for an impact that didn’t happen. The familiar hollowed out dirt bottom wasn’t there. Above me, the dim, silver light of the moon quickly disappeared, leaving me alone in a pitch-black chasm that never ended. Every couple of seconds the flashlight threatened to slip out of my hand, but I tightened my grip each time. There’s no way I’d lose something precious to Dad. The flashlight’s beam erratically danced around the chasm, where I caught glimpses of brown dirt and gray stone encrusted with sparkling gems. Meanwhile, the unchanging dark void continued to drag me down to the center of the earth.

After a certain point, I started counting to try and distract

myself from thinking about how I'd turn into a splatter of blood once I finally hit the ground. One, two, three... 30 ... 50 ... After reaching 100 I stopped counting. Instead, I closed my eyes, even though it didn't change anything, and contemplated my predicament. A seven-foot-deep hole magically turned into a tunnel leading to the center of the Earth somehow. It was like it had listened to me and granted me my wish to escape, a wish I already regretted making. I loved adventure, but not when I didn't have a clue what was happening. And from how long I'd been falling, there's no way I'd survive, even if a field of pillows and marshmallows sat at the bottom. All the preparation I'd gone through, all the survival tools I'd brought with me, was for nothing.

Then, without any fanfare, I hit the ground and instantly lost consciousness. I didn't even hear the thud.

Chapter 2

When I came to, my body wanted to keep dreaming. “Where am I?” I groaned as I forced my eyes open.

I couldn’t see anything. Absolute darkness surrounded me on all sides, not a single pinprick of light in sight. I raised my hand to my eyes until it brushed my eyelashes, but nothing appeared in my vision. For all intents and purposes, I was blind, stuck in a cave thousands of feet below the earth, with no way out.

“Hello? Is anybody here?” I yelled as loudly as I could in a desperate attempt to catch someone’s attention. The only response I received was my own echo.

“Ok, Bran. Calm down. You can still get out of here by yourself,” I whispered. First, I slowly flexed my arms and legs. Despite landing face first, there weren’t any broken bones. And as I touched the rest of my body, nothing else felt out of place. My backpack didn’t have a missing seam either. By all accounts, I should’ve turned into a crime scene that explorers would discover centuries later. But right now, I wasn’t going to question my luck.

Next, I checked that my pocketknife still sat nice and snug inside my pants pocket. When I touched the red plastic case, I brushed against something rectangular, and it triggered an epiphany. “My phone!” I yelled. I could use it to call Cassie. If I didn’t have a signal, my phone would at least provide a good source of light and prove I wasn’t blind. I yanked it out of my pocket and pressed the bottom button on instinct, expecting to see the home screen light up with the picture of me, Mom and Dad from our last birthday party together. Instead, nothing. I pressed it again, rapidly clicked it, then held it down, but the stupid brick of metal still didn’t turn on. With a dejected sigh I glumly put it back in my pocket and checked for the most important piece of equipment right now - my flashlight. The thing is, I couldn’t find it.

It must’ve slipped from my hands when I passed out. Did it shatter into pieces? I crouched down and pawed the rocky ground to no avail. But after several minutes of increasingly frantic searching, my fingers brushed up against something cold and metallic. “Found it!” I yelled in triumph. I clumsily grabbed the handle, but right before my finger hit the switch, I paused. For all my love of exploration and adventure, finding out what was waiting in this

limbo of darkness and eerie silence scared me. But I needed to find out. My thumb hit the switch, and the familiar bright yellow cone appeared. It turns out I wasn't blind. The thing is, I hadn't paid attention to where the flashlight was pointing, and light shined into my eyes with the intensity of a solar flare.

"Ah!" I shrieked in surprise, losing my grip on the flashlight in the process. Time slowed to a crawl as it fell towards the rocky floor. In those few seconds, I glimpsed a field of gray stone that extended into the distance. If I didn't pick up the flashlight now, I truly was stuck up a creek without a paddle. I fumbled to regain my grip on the handle, but it slipped through my shaking, clammy fingers with ease and hit the ground. The glass shattered into pieces, and the way out along with it.

"I'M SO STUPID!" All I had to grab onto was the briefest glimpse of the cave. Fat chance that would help me when I didn't know where the exit was.

"Stay calm, Bran. You're on your own down here. You know exactly what to do," I said out loud to calm myself down. I just needed to think through things logically. That's what Captain Kidd always did in way worse scenarios. Waiting for help to arrive wouldn't work. Not when getting lost was as simple as breathing right now. It would only be a matter of time until I starved to death, collapsed from exhaustion, or both. Fortunately, I had an ace up my sleeve for this exact situation.

I picked up the flashlight and held onto it with an iron grip. I wouldn't let go of it again. When I found my way back outside, fixing it would be the first thing I'd do. It was a keepsake from Dad, after all.

"Let's see how much space I have to work with," I whispered. I extended my unoccupied hand towards the ceiling, where it immediately hit solid rock. "Ouch!" I yelped in surprise. "Well, that answers that question. Now I need to find a wall."

That process involved me walking forwards at a snail's pace while waving my hands around like an idiot. After several minutes of floundering around, I touched a hard, rough, rocky, surface. "And finally, it's time to use the technique Captain Kidd used in the labyrinth chapter."

I removed my left hand and licked my index finger. After coating it in a thick layer of saliva, I raised it into the air to feel

which direction the cave's air blew from.

I waited. And waited. And waited some more. I chuckled a bit. Captain Kidd knew what he was doing. I must've messed up a step along the way. When I was ready to panic again, that's when the absolute faintest of breezes tickled my finger, blowing past me to the right.

"It worked."

With one hand on the wall and the other still holding my broken flashlight, I shuffled forwards. I didn't have a light to guide me, so I relied on a combination of pure luck and hope that the cave would remain this flat. As I went further along, I started to make out my immediate surroundings as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The ground was gray and featureless, and the walls were made up of jagged stone that could easily cut my hands if I placed my hands on the wrong corner. I still kept my hands glued firmly on the walls. If it meant leaving this place, a little bit of blood didn't matter.

I shuffled along like that for at least the next half hour. I didn't know the specifics. Not having any source of light does wonders to your sense of time. But at some point, a speck of light shone up ahead. I froze and rubbed my eyes to make sure my mind wasn't playing tricks on me. It didn't disappear. My mind wasn't playing tricks on me. The further I went, the brighter the cave got. When I clearly saw the unchanging stone field in front of me, I lost all pretense of being careful and sprinted towards the light as fast as my legs would carry me. The faint sound of rushing water trickled in the distance. My breathing devolved into ragged gasps. My stomach growled for something to eat, and I licked my dry lips for a taste of some water. All the pain and hunger and thirst I'd managed to suppress came roaring back as I made it within touching distance of the outside world. HURRY UP!

Then, after all the teasing, I made it. I ran headfirst into the speck, and that tiny dot of light turned into a field of white light that wouldn't disappear. For a second, I worried the switch from one single color to another had destroyed my vision. Thankfully, my eyes managed to slowly adjust to the light. I prepared myself to see the forest I'd explored my entire life. But as the harsh glare faded, something else greeted me. Something incomprehensible. My own

‘We aren’t in Kansas’ moment.

“Where ... where am I?”

Chapter 3

I thought I'd made it outside. It would be a quick journey through the woods to make it to a road, I'd hitchhike back to town, apologize to mom, and find some way to deal with Kevin. But now I didn't know what to think.

I'd left one cave and emerged straight into another. The cave stretched taller than wide, and another opening on the opposite side was lit with a beckoning green glow. When I strained my eyes, I made out a ceiling riddled with stalactites pointing down like giant, sharp teeth.

This had to be a dream. Right? I took my first tentative steps inside. My high tops touched multicolored mosses and ferns that crunched under my weight. The plants carpeted the walls and ground and hid underneath the cover of mushrooms of various sizes, colors, and patterns. There were pure white ones the size of my pinky, narrow yellow ones with wide, flat caps, and a giant red one covered in light blue spots that stood at least fifteen feet tall.

The big mushroom in particular caught my attention. Upon closer inspection, the blue spots glowed brightly as if lightbulbs sat inside. But I didn't see any. Instead, they glowed all by themselves, and that glow was accompanied by a soft, buzzing hum.

As for that rushing water I heard? That came from an opening right beneath the ceiling that shot out hundreds of gallons of water a minute. It poured down with a roar and pooled into an enormous lake.

But the most breathtaking part was the tree standing proud and regal on a small plot of land smack dab in the middle of the lake. Black flakes speckled its snow-white bark, while its leaves shimmered a beautiful translucent blue that shone even brighter in the water's reflection.

That's when a rock sitting next to the lake sprouted the head of a snake and started peacefully lapping away at the water. When I took a single step towards it, the animal turned to meet my wide-eyed gaze with one of its own. It retreated into its shell and scurried away as fast as its legs could carry it, leaving me the most confused I'd been in my short, fourteen-year life.

Caves were supposed to be dark, damp and dingy. The plants and animals living in them should've been the creepiest, ugliest

things imaginable. But the sight in front of me completely shattered those assumptions.

I went over to the lake and observed my reflection in the water. My clothes were covered in dust and dirt, from my high tops to my jeans to my emerald-green button up to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park shirt Mom and Dad bought for me on one of the last vacations we took together. My hair resembled a tumbleweed instead of the usual mop. Dark circles straight from a panda hung underneath my eyes, while cuts and scrapes covered my arms and legs. I looked absolutely terrible, but I didn't care. Not when my sense of adventure was firing on all cylinders. I stepped away from the lake and spun around, admiring the fantastical scenery in all its glory. The world turned so topsy-turvy that I tipped over and fell down straight on my butt, landing on a patch of lime green moss growing underneath one of the larger regular mushrooms.

"Hehehe!" I giggled in pure, unadulterated glee. The cool moss rubbing on my skin felt incredible after being surrounded by nothing but hard stone for hours.

"I have to bring Cassie here when I escape this place," I said. Between us, she had more interest in the natural world, while I liked the act of discovering new things. She'd try figuring out the details of all these foreign plants and animals - how they behaved, what they ate, all that stuff. And with how many there were just in this one area, Cassie would have a field day.

"Now then, let's take a good look and make sure that everything's still accounted for," I said as I got down to business. I unzipped every pocket of my backpack and began emptying out the contents. My food? Check. Water bottle? Check. Blanket and extra pairs of clothes? Check once again. All my clothes, survival equipment and provisions were accounted for. The flashlight was the only broken object, which was now nothing more than a hollow shell. I packed everything up except for the blanket and water bottle and let out a huge, hefty sigh of relief. With the immediate danger out of the way, it was time to reward myself for a job well done.

I flopped onto the moss, tossing and turning until I found a comfortable position beneath the shadow of the big mushroom. The nearby melody of rushing water served as a lullaby. You've done

good, Bran. You've done good.

Something was watching me. I didn't know how much time had passed. It was hard to tell without the sun or moon letting me know. But with how refreshed I felt, at least for several hours. And during that time, a presence had made its way here. It didn't come from the animals. None of them even bothered glancing in my direction. Whatever it was, its existence put me on edge.

I tried ignoring it, but it didn't work. "Please go away. PLEASE leave me alone!" I shouted in a desperate attempt to scare it away. But nothing happened. Why would it? With a heaving sigh, I opened my eyes and sat up. More than feeling scared, I was pissed off by how I couldn't find what kept staring at me no matter where I looked - not by the giant waterfall, not underneath any of the mushrooms, not even clinging to the walls or ceiling. "Where are you?!" I yelled. That was loud enough to send the wildlife scurrying under the safety of the mushrooms and moss, leaving me alone with the presence.

When my eyes reached the opposite side of the cave by the tunnel, I spotted it. Its black body blended in perfectly with the surrounding vegetation, save for a tiny black point that rose above a tuft of bright green moss. Once I noticed it, its camouflage shattered. I followed it without an issue, even when it started climbing over one particularly dense pile of moss.

"Is it crawling towards me?" I whispered a little too loudly. The *thing* perked up and two yellow orbs gazed right at me. I immediately realized my mistake, but it was too late. The creature's body jiggled in excitement like a blob of jelly and picked up the pace.

It resembled a small pool of wet paint splattered on the ground. The only sound it made was the soft, slimy squelch of its body slithering along the mossy floor, and the noise made me flinch. I wrapped my blanket around my backpack and used it as a shield while I slowly retreated in the sitting position.

"Stay back. My bones are all brittle and thin, and my muscles taste like soap," I yelled, trying to make myself the most unappetizing meal in the world. But the blob kept crawling towards me in ominous silence, and I scooted backwards just as fast. It didn't take long before rock pressed against my back. I was trapped, with

nowhere else to go.

With an uncanny slithering, like a puddle of paint had managed to gain sentience, it crawled over the moss with a one-track mind. "My blood is poisonous! You'll die if you drink it!" I said in a desperate last-ditch attempt. It didn't work. The slime kept on crawling, completely unfazed.

I didn't want to die. Not here. Not at this moment. So, I closed my eyes and prayed that it would somehow disappear. I didn't believe in a higher power. I'd never prayed, even when Dad passed away. But with insane twist after crazy turn, what did I have to lose?

The slithering sound stopped. I couldn't hear anything except for the sound of rushing water and the dull hum of the glowing mushrooms. Time passed agonizingly slowly as I thought through all the possibilities. Did the slime die somehow? Did my prayers somehow work?

"Hey! What's wrong with you? There's no reason for you to be so scared."

What was that voice? It sounded upbeat and cheerful. Did it come from the slime? No way. Even if it coul-

"Helllloooooo? Are you dead? No, or else you wouldn't be breathing. Hurry up and answer me!"

That voice hadn't disappeared. There was no doubt in my mind who it belonged to. But that couldn't b-

"You're really stubborn, you know that? Hurry up and look at me already."

Despite my better judgment, I did just that. The blob sat on top of my backpack. He was only a couple inches away from my face. "Finally. Jeez, that took forever," it said. The gap where words came from expanded and contracted as it spoke. It had no notable features except for two beady yellow eyes and the gap that most likely served as its mouth.

"What are you doing in a place so far out of the way? I don't think I've ever seen something like you before. Where are you from? Was the walk here hard? How long have you been here? What...."

The blob kept barraging me with an endless series of questions that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to my first time meeting Kevin. He needed to quiet down now.

"Wh-What are you?"

"What do you mean 'What am I?' What does it look like?"

I'm a slime, of course," the blob replied in a matter-of-fact tone, wriggling its body up and down.

"By the way, we haven't properly introduced ourselves yet, have we? My name is Blank. Pleased to meet you. What's yours? Come on, don't be shy."

"B-Bran," I hesitantly responded.

"Bran? It's a good name," Blank said with a nod of approval, as if he would change my name if he didn't like the sound of it.

"Um, where am I? I thought I had reached the surface, but now it's like I stumbled into an alternate reality."

"What do you mean the surface? Alternate reality? You know as well as I do that there's no surface here in Cavernia."

I blinked. I didn't hear him right. "Excuse me... where are we, again?"

"Cavernia. You know, the world of caves."

"Wait ... this isn't Earth anymore?"

"Earth? What's that? Never heard of it," Blank said with genuine curiosity as he stared at me expectantly.

He's serious. I made another sweep of the cave. It all made sense now. It's why I didn't splat on the ground into a mess of flesh and bone the second I hit the ground. It was the reason I was staring at a tree plucked from a fantasy game. And it's why there were mushrooms that glowed a vibrant shade of blue. Somehow, somehow, my special hiding-hole had turned into a portal to another world.

This was the chance to embark on the adventure I'd spent my entire life dreaming about. This is why I'd explored every inch of the forest with Cassie, why I'd poured over old maps and tinkered with different tools all night, why I looked through Google Maps to find the best place to explore. All of it was building towards this moment.

"...ello. Hellooo. Are you there?" There was that voice again, accompanied by something squishy and slimy running in rivulets through my hair. The dampness made my whole body shiver. "Get off of me!" I yelled as I shook my head around.

"Hey, that did the trick! You're alive again. I got a bit worried when you suddenly froze up."

"Wait a minute ... Blank, are you what's hiding in my hair?"

"Yep! I had a feeling this would snap you out of your

brooding, and guess what? It did!" he said. He slowly dripped down my face onto the moss, and his bright yellow eyes stared straight into mine with concern. "Are you ok? I lost you the moment I mentioned Cavernia."

"Not really. This situation feels too absurd to be believable," I said, surprised by how calm I felt.

"Don't worry, because I'm surprised too. I've come here before, and that cave back there," Blank said as he gestured towards the gaping black void behind us, "has nothing in it - no plants, no animals, not even a mushroom. So I didn't expect anything to wander out of there, much less you."

"Wait a minute - what's the deal with the giant hole inside there? The one on the ceiling."

Blank stared at me with genuine concern. He honestly believed I was insane. "There isn't any. I've tried exploring the cave by using a glowshroom, and I found nothing except for a field of rocks. It's one big dead end."

"There's no way out?"

"Way out? What do you mean?"

I hesitated. The black blob stared at me with an eager twinkle in his eyes, and I didn't know how to respond. Could I trust this weird creature that I just met? He was something straight out of a video game, yet somehow managed to exist. Would he even believe me? On the other hand, I was alone and didn't have a plan. Someone who could help me navigate this world would be invaluable, and he seemed friendly enough. However, for this partnership to succeed, I needed to clarify something.

"I'm not from here," I said.

"What city are you from?"

"No no no. You don't understand what I'm trying to say. I'm not from Cavernia. My name's Bran, and I'm a 14-year-old human who lives in Virginia."

Dead silence. I expected Blank to say something along the lines of "no way" and jump around in disbelief. Instead, he stared at me while the waterfall rushed down and the mushrooms buzzed in the background, that happy expression still plastered on his face. He

was taking this better than I expected-

“Screw you.”

Huh?

Chapter 4

Did I hear that right? Blank hadn't moved an inch. "I'm pretty sure I misheard you. Did you say someth-"

"You heard perfectly fine. Screw you," Blank said. He still had the same happy expression on his face, but his words now carried a distinct taste of venom.

"Listen, I'm not from here," I continued on. There had to be a way to explain my situation to him. He needed to understand, even if it ended up a long shot. "I'm originally from a planet called Earth, and I fell into a giant hole that spat me out in that cave back there."

"Do you expect me to believe you?"

"Not really, but you don't have to be so rude about it," I said, emphasizing the last three words. But he didn't notice.

"What is Earth anyways? Some fantasy land that you made up, probably," Blank said.

"How could I have made it up? You say you've never seen anyone like me before. I didn't even know what this world was called at first. What reason is there for me to lie?"

"Well, this is ... some kind of scam. Yeah, that's it. You're trying to capture me and sell me at some black market when I let down my guard."

I couldn't counter that. I stood there with my mouth wide open as I tried processing the stupidest words I'd ever heard. I understood not believing what I had to say, but the justification for it went into absurd territory. Why couldn't he listen? Same deal as Kevin. If I wanted to change his mind, I'd need to provide undeniable proof.

"Let me understand here - you don't believe me," I said.

"Yeah, that's right. Do you have something to say about that, Bran, if that's even your real name?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do. And it'll make you believe me without a shadow of a doubt," I replied as I methodically unzipped my backpack, Blank's body rippling in confusion.

"What are you pulling out?"

"Oh, you'll see," I replied as I reached in and rummaged through the bag. I had so many options to prove I wasn't from here. My blanket, my water bottle and my container of instant ramen were all good options. But when I felt the crinkle of a certain wrapper, I

knew I'd found the perfect piece of evidence.

"Here's the proof you wanted, Blank," I said as I brought a family-sized package of Oreos to his face.

"What are those?" he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"They're a little treat from my planet. You know, Earth." I ripped open the cover and took out a cookie. "They're delicious." I raised the Oreo until it brushed against my lips and then flaunted the prize in front of Blank. The goading worked. His body bubbled and boiled in envy. When I chomped down on the cookie and made sure to chew it in an obnoxious manner, the pressure increased until he was a volcano about ready to burst. "You want one?" I said as I took out another cookie. "It's tasty. Filled with chocolate and cream that melts in your mouth." My plan was working. Blank slowly approached me while his body literally dripped behind him, with all his attention focused on the Oreos.

When he touched my foot, I nudged him away and dangled the Obea in the air. "Hold on. You need to say that I'm from Earth first."

"Well, I..." Blank struggled. He still didn't want to admit it, but I could feel his willpower slipping away, leaving nothing but his desire for the cookie.

Right when I thought I had him, Blank paused, blinked, and all the slime scattered along the floor sucked back into his body like getting swallowed by a vacuum cleaner.

"Nice try, Bran. You almost got me. But you'll have to have to try better than that if you want me to admit defeat."

"Dang," I muttered. He had more fight in him than I anticipated. But it wasn't a huge issue, because I had an ace up my sleeve that would make Blank admit the truth beyond a shadow of a doubt. A smile flickered along my face as I felt my fingers brush against the wrinkled hardback cover.

"Hey, Blank, do you want to see something even more amazing?"

"Do your worst. Trust me, I'm prepared for whatever you throw at me."

There we go. I'd snared him in my web, and now I only had to lunge in for the kill. "Here it is."

With that, I revealed my copy of *The Tales of the Explorer*

Captain Kidd to Blank. Captain Kidd stood proudly on his ship with his trademark bushy red beard, staring across the ocean towards an island in the distance. I flipped through the pages, which were creased and worn from the number of times I'd read it over the years.

"This here is my most prized possession," I stated with pride. "I bet you've never seen something like this befo-"

I trailed off. Blank was transfixed, almost hypnotized by the book. I moved it left, right, up, and down, and finally in a circle. I then did the same process faster, then even faster. And Blank still followed it.

"Um, are you ok there?" I asked as I lowered the book.

"Ha," Blank gasped as he broke out of his trance. "Ok, I give up. I admit it. You're from Earth. Please just let me read that book," he desperately pleaded.

"O - ok. Be careful that you don't damage it."

My skin tingled when I passed him the book. In elementary school a copy of it disappeared from my desk during a trip to the bathroom. When Cassie and I found the culprits in the school courtyard, the bullies had already stomped on the cover, torn out a good chunk of the pages and drew scribbles all over the rest. Cassie smashed the nose of the biggest bully with a satisfying crunch, and by the end we all sported at least one broken bone. We had to apologize to each other in front of our parents and the principal, and there was a school wide assembly on the dangers of bullying where the three of us were called out by name. We got teased and mocked about it for the rest of the school year, and mom had to buy me another copy. I hadn't brought it out of the house again until today.

If Blank so much as tickled the page, it would leave smudges that wouldn't come off. But as long as I made sure he didn't touch it, I'd take the risk. But when I opened the cover to the first page, Blank snatched the book out of my hands, covering it in his slimy black body, then spit it out onto the ground.

"What did I just say?! You covered the book in your stains!" I yelled.

But when I took a closer look, I didn't find any black streaks or blotches. The book appeared completely untouched.

"I'm going to read this now," Blank said as he flipped to the beginning. I responded with a small, stunned nod of approval.

Blank's eyes darted from line to line as he absorbed every word, making no noise except for soft rustles as he turned the pages. He had completely zoned me out.

I didn't mind though. It gave me a chance to observe him in closer detail.

He sat as small and compact as a basketball, completely smooth and spherical. Except for his mouth and eyes, he had no other body parts to speak of. He morphed part of his body into a crude, blobby arm to flip the page. He was a slime straight out of a fantasy game, except he possessed way more intelligence than all of them combined. Witnessing him ripple and bubble as he read the book, a deep guilt stabbed me through the heart.

"Um, Blank ..."

"Yeah? What's up?" He responded, somehow managing to tear his attention away from the pages.

"I apologize for how I acted earlier. I shouldn't have freaked out the moment I saw you."

Blank vacantly sat there. Did he even register what I'd said?

"Hey, do you want to come along with me?"

That didn't enter the stratosphere of my expectations.

"What did you say?"

Blank closed the book and nudged it back to me. "Listen, I came here to search for my friend Fingal. Real tall, green skin, wears a pair of glasses."

"Green skin?"

"Yeah, he's a Seipi. Are they not a species where you're from?"

"Of course not!"

"So that means you haven't seen him. Well, whatever. He's been missing for a while, so I came down here to find him, but it turns out I've found you instead. I don't believe that you're from"

"Earth."

"Earth. Right. Well, I don't believe you're from there, but from what I can tell, you're clearly in need of some help. If you're searching for a way out of here, then my friend Mira would be fine with helping you while we cobble together a plan."

"Wouldn't I be imposing on you?"

"Nah. Trust me, she takes things in stride. Are you

interested?”

“Well...” I trailed off as I considered my options. This was what I wanted, right? If I didn’t accept his offer, I would be on my own in an alien world with dangers lurking around every corner.

As if to prove my point, the giant tree violently shook as a tornado of what looked like bats flew out from behind the leaves in a giant, surging storm. They formed a black and red cloud that let out a cacophony of screeches, then vanished into a hole in the ceiling.

I wouldn’t survive without help. I still didn’t trust Blank either, but he didn’t seem malicious. I’d be crazy not to take him up on his offer.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I answered as I snatched up my book and gingerly set it in my backpack.

“Trust me, you won’t regret this. Are you ready to go? We’re heading off to a city called Amanita.”

“I’ve been ready.” I stood up, startling the onlooking animals. Blank nodded and raced towards the tunnel at the other side of the cave, letting me stretch my numb limbs. And when I did, my legs danced a little jig. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, one that promised mystery and drama and action. I might manage to discover a new landmark and make a name for myself as an explorer on this planet. I’d be in the same league as Captain Kidd. My heart twinged a little bit knowing that Cassie wouldn’t experience this with me, but I’d find a way to tell her all about my adventures.

I finished packing my things and jogged up to Blank. The cave leading out trailed off beyond the horizon, lit by green and blue mushrooms emitting a gentle glow. It signaled the beginning of something special.

“Make sure you keep up,” Blank said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be following right behind you,” I responded with a giddy smile as we set off towards Amanita.