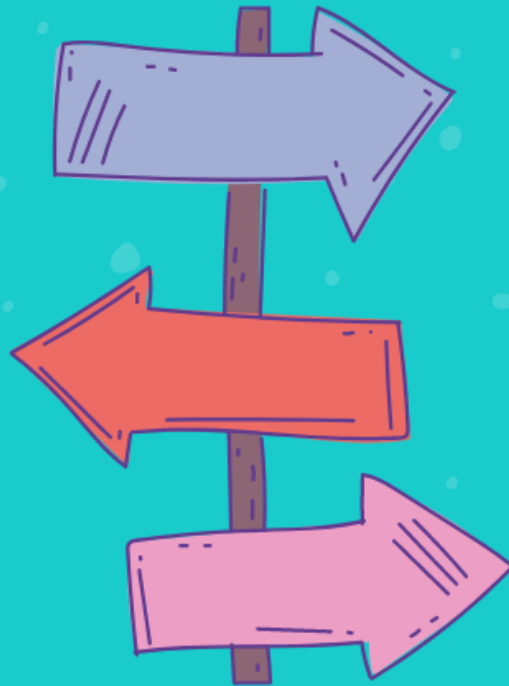


ONE STORY, THREE WAYS



Jennifer Honeybourn



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

I acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts

THE STORY BEGINS...	3
THE TUNNEL ON THE LEFT	7
THE TUNNEL IN THE MIDDLE	21
THE TUNNEL ON THE RIGHT	35

The Story Begins...

Elliott stared at the tent pole in his hand and frowned.

“Does it matter which end goes into the ground?” he asked his friend Jayesh. Both ends of the slim aluminum pole looked the same to him, so maybe it didn’t make a difference.

“You’re asking me?” Jayesh said, laughing. “How would I know. I’ve never been camping before, remember?”

Elliott sighed. Technically, he’d never been camping before, either — he’d only ever slept in the tent in his backyard and he was pretty sure that didn’t count. Not in the same way that being in the actual wilderness, with no access to running water or indoor bathrooms, did.

He looked over to his mom for help, but she was busy setting up her own tent, the one that she and his sister Olivia would sleep in tonight. Olivia was standing off to the side, doing the renegade. Like Elliott, she’d been looking forward to this weekend, even though she usually preferred the great indoors — curling up on the couch with a graphic novel, playing Minecraft on her laptop or conducting experiments with her chemistry kit.

Elliott studied how his mom was constructing her tent. He knelt down beside the flattened blue nylon and followed her steps, sliding the pole through a long tunnel. He repeated the process with a second pole, and then he and Jayesh raised the tent.

Elliott let out a whoop and high-fived Jayesh. They secured each corner to the ground with a metal stake and then scrambled inside the tent.

“This is so cool,” Jayesh said, glancing around.

Elliott nodded. He was so glad that his mom had agreed to let Jayesh tag along this weekend. Being with his best friend took some of the sting out of the fact that a work emergency

had forced his dad to bail on the trip.

A shadow fell across the front of the tent. A moment later, Olivia poked her head through the nylon flaps. “Can. I. Come. In.?” she asked in a robotic voice.

“There’s not enough room,” Elliott said, but his sister ignored him and pushed her way inside, sandwiching herself between him and Jayesh.

“It. Smells. Weird. In. Here.”

“Stop talking like that!” he snapped. She knew he hated it when she pretended to be a robot — which was probably exactly why she did it.

Olivia smiled. “Talking. Like. What?”

Jayesh looked like he was trying to hold back a laugh. For reasons Elliott would never understand, he seemed to find his sister amusing.

“This is an enchanted forest, you know,” Olivia whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” Elliott asked.

“I don’t want the fairies to hear me. If they know that we know about them, then they won’t come out.”

He rolled his eyes. “There’s no such thing as fairies.”

“What about the tooth fairy?”

He grimaced. Okay, so she had him there.

“It’s too hot in here,” Elliott said. It wasn’t really that hot, but he was irritated with his sister and he hoped that she’d take the hint and leave. When she didn’t, he rolled onto his knees and crawled outside.

He walked over to his mom, who was digging around in the trunk of their van.

“Can we go explore?” Elliott asked. He wanted to check out the rest of the campground.

“Sure. Just stick to the path and don’t wander off too far, okay?”

Jayesh came up beside him. They started to walk away when his mom added, “And take Olivia with you.”

Elliott groaned, but he knew better than to argue. His mom had made it clear that she expected him to include his sister this weekend. At the time, it had seemed like a small enough price to pay for allowing him to bring Jayesh.

Olivia popped out of the tent. She hurried over to join them and the three of them set out on the dirt path.

“You know this forest is haunted,” she said.

“I thought you said it was enchanted,” Jayesh replied.

She shrugged. “It is. But it’s also haunted.”

His eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

Elliott snorted. “It’s not haunted. She’s making that up.”

“I am not making it up,” Olivia said, affronted. “Haven’t you ever heard of The Merrickville Ghost?”

Elliott sighed. He glanced over at his sister, about to tell her off for trying to scare Jayesh, when he noticed a huge tree with a hole in its trunk that looked like an arched doorway.

“Hey, check it out,” he said. He left the path and walked through the brush towards the tree. The hole was as tall as he was. When he peeked inside, he expected to see the other side of the tree, but instead there was a ramp that led down into the darkness.

“Weird,” Jayesh said.

Elliott stepped inside the tree.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” his friend said, grabbing his arm. “You don’t know

where it leads.”

“Come on, we have to check it out,” Elliott said.

Jayesh shook his head. “It’s dark in there and we don’t have a flashlight.”

“Yes, we do.” Olivia pulled a Swiss Army Knife out of her pocket and pushed a small button. A bright beam of light emitted from the end of the shiny red case. She handed the flashlight to Elliott.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea,” Jayesh said, but he followed Elliott and Olivia into the tree.

Elliott’s heart pounded as they made their way down the sloping tunnel. The air smelled like earth. Strangely, the lower they went, the more the tunnel widened, so eventually the three of them were able to walk side-by-side. Another minute and they reached the bottom, where the tunnel split into three directions.

“What should we do?” Olivia asked.

“We should go back,” Jayesh said, his voice wavering. “We’re going to get lost.”

Elliott knew that he should probably listen to his friend, but how could they give up now? He couldn’t ignore the tug he felt to keep going, to find out exactly where this tree tunnel led.

“Let’s just go a little bit further,” he said.

“Okay,” Olivia said. “But which tunnel are we going to take?”

The Tunnel on the Left

Elliott chose the left tunnel.

He walked forward, guided by the thin beam of the flashlight, Jayesh and Olivia following closely behind him. They hadn't gone far when he spotted a greenish-glow in the darkness just up ahead.

Elliott's stomach flipped as he trained the flashlight on the tunnel wall. "Do you guys see that?"

"Yeah," Olivia said. "What do you think it is?"

"I don't know."

Their footsteps slowed. As they inched closer to the glowing rock, Elliott realized that the fluorescent marks on the wall were cave paintings. Excitement rushed through him. He'd learned about cave paintings a few years ago when his class had studied the prehistoric era, although it was pretty clear that this artwork wasn't nearly that old. For one thing, the artist had used neon colours instead of charcoal or other kinds of earth pigments typically used during that time period, and for another, they'd painted highly detailed fantastical animals like unicorns and ogres.

"Wow," Jayesh said, studying a glittery green dragon with bright pink eyes. "I wonder who painted these."

"Whoever it was, why would they paint them down here, where no one can see them?" Olivia wondered.

Elliott frowned. "Maybe it means something."

"Like what?" Jayesh asked.

Elliott scanned the wall. His eyes widened as he noticed a round silver knob, just underneath the foot of a bright yellow ogre. He reached out and turned the knob. The rock wall swung inward, revealing a spiral staircase.

“Like it’s a sign to identify a secret door,” he said, grinning. He stuck his head through the doorway and looked up. The wrought-iron staircase twisted so high into the air that he couldn’t see where it ended. He’d just placed his foot on the bottom step when Jayesh grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Maybe we shouldn’t. We don’t know what’s up there.”

“I’ll bet it takes us up to Rapunzel’s tower,” Olivia said.

Elliott shook his head. Only his sister would believe that they could walk through a door and straight into a fairy tale. “It’ll probably just lead us back to the forest,” he replied.

Jayesh didn’t look convinced but he gave in and followed Elliott and Olivia up the stairs. They climbed and they climbed and they climbed, winding around in tighter and tighter circles until they began to feel dizzy. Elliott was sweating and his legs were burning and he was sure he was going to throw up, but then, mercifully, they reached the last stair.

In front of them was another door, this one made of solid wood. It was missing a doorknob and Elliott half-expected that when he pushed on the door it wouldn’t budge and they’d have to go all the way back down the stairs. He was relieved when the door popped open and a breeze of cool, pine-scented air washed over him.

He stepped through the doorway and into the forest. At first glance, it looked like any other forest, but when he looked closer, he began to notice that it wasn’t the same at all. What he first took for a bunch of red wildflowers were in fact a ring of large mushrooms, their shiny red caps covered with white polka-dots. And the trees were unlike any trees he’d ever seen before —

they were much taller and thicker and the bark was covered in carvings similar to the paintings they'd seen on the tunnel wall. Gnarled branches curved into sky, twisting together to create a lacy canopy of leaves high above their heads. Golden light trickled through the leaves and there was a sparkle to the air, almost like someone had thrown out a handful of glitter.

“Fairy dust!” Olivia said, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. “This must be where the fairies live. I told you this was an enchanted forest!”

“There’s no such thing as fairies,” Elliott said, but his heart started to beat a little faster. He might not believe in imaginary creatures, but he couldn’t deny that this place felt like it could be out of a fairy tale.

“Do you guys hear that?” Jayesh asked. “Sounds like there’s a waterfall nearby.”

Elliott smiled. He was about to suggest that they go and look for it when a gust of wind blew hard enough to lift his hair off his forehead. A moment later, he heard the door slam closed behind them. He turned around and his stomach dropped to his toes.

The door was gone. The entrance that they’d just walked through had somehow vanished.

“Where did the door go?” Jayesh cried.

“I don’t know.” Elliott ran over and felt the rough rock of the mountain, searching for a way back inside the tunnel. “It has to be some kind of trick.”

But if it was a trick, it was a really good one — he couldn’t find any sign that a door had ever been there.

He shook his head. Doors didn’t just disappear. It wasn’t possible.

Jayesh wrung his hands. “This is just great. How are we supposed to get back to the campsite now?”

“We could walk around to the other side of the mountain,” Olivia said.

“No way,” Elliott said. “We’ll get lost for sure.”

Just then something buzzed past his ear. He yelped and frantically swatted the air, hoping that he wasn’t about to be stung by a wasp.

“Hey!” a voice cried. “Watch it, you almost hit me!”

Elliott froze in shock as a tiny girl with iridescent wings flew in front of his face. She was about the size of one of his Star Wars action figures. She had long curly red hair that spilled over her shoulders and she wore a white dress that fluttered to her knees.

Jayesh blinked. “Is that butterfly talking to you?”

The girl scowled at him. “I’m not a butterfly. I’m a fairy.”

Olivia elbowed Elliott in the side. “Told you fairies were real,” she said smugly.

Elliott flinched as the fairy flew closer, quick as a hummingbird, and studied him with her head cocked. Her eyes were an amber colour and her skin was so pale it was almost translucent.

“I’ve never seen real-live humans before.” She poked him in the cheek with her teeny finger. Her voice was high-pitched, louder than he would have expected from something so small. “What are you doing in Theynia?” she asked.

“We came through a door in the mountain. We thought it would lead us back to our campsite but somehow we ended up here,” he said.

“And now the door’s disappeared and we have no way to get back,” Jayesh added. “Unless you know another route we can take?”

The fairy shook her head. “The way back to your world is the same way that you came into ours. Normally, I’d be able to unseal the door for you, but the goblins have made that impossible.” She held out her leg to show them a shiny metal band circling her ankle. “It’s made

of goblin iron, which counteracts magic. They put these cuffs on all of the fairies years ago to keep us from casting any spells.”

“That’s awful,” Olivia said. “Why would they do that?”

“Because they’re afraid that we’ll try to take over the kingdom,” she replied. “We were prepared to live peacefully, but the goblins preferred to make themselves our enemies.”

“Maybe we can help you get the cuff off,” Jayesh said.

The fairy sighed. “Thanks, but there’s no way to get it off. Believe me, I’ve tried. The goblin king is the only one who can remove it. He has the key. He wears it on a chain around his neck.”

Elliott chewed his lip. If the fairy was telling the truth, then the only way to get back to the campsite was through the vanished door. And the door would never reappear unless she conjured it, which wasn’t possible because the iron cuff was draining her magical abilities.

“If we can convince the goblin king to free you, then you’ll open the door for us, right?” he asked.

The fairy’s face lit up with hope, only to dim a moment later. “Yes, I’d open the door, but trust me, he’s never going to agree to set me free,” she said with a sigh. “The goblins are determined to make sure that we stay weak so that they can remain strong. They aren’t interested in helping anyone but themselves — King Grugbok won’t care if you’re stuck in Theynia forever.”

“We have to convince him,” Elliott replied. If they didn’t find a way back to the campsite, his mom would never know what had happened to them and he couldn’t live with that. He’d gotten them all into this mess, now it was up to him to somehow get them out. “Where can we find the goblin king?”

“Uh, are you sure we should be doing this,” Jayesh said, shooting him a nervous glance. “The dude’s a *goblin*. In case you didn’t know, goblins are monsters. And monsters are scary.”

The fairy nodded. “He’s right — they’re really quite terrifying. Especially King Grugbok. He’s the worst of them all.”

Jayesh grabbed Elliott’s arm and dug his fingers into his skin. “Did you hear that? He’s the worst of them all!”

“Yeah, I heard,” Elliott said. “But what other choice do we have? You want to go home, don’t you?”

Jayesh grimaced. “Of course.”

“Then we have to talk the goblin king into releasing her. It’s the only way we’re going to get out of here.”

“He’s right,” Olivia said. “We have to at least try.”

Jayesh’s shoulders slumped. “Ugh, fine. But if we get killed by a goblin I’ll never forgive you guys.”

Elliott looked at the fairy. “Will you take us to King Grugbok?”

She nodded. “I’ll warn you, it’s a bit of a walk. His castle is on the other side of the forest.” She fluttered her wings and started to fly towards a break in the trees, a comet of glitter trailing behind her. “I’m Elora, by the way,” she called over her shoulder as the three of them followed after her.

“I’m Ellio—”

“Ssh,” Olivia said, cutting him off. “Don’t tell her your name!”

Elliott blinked. “Why not?”

“If you tell a fairy your name, they can take control of you,” she whispered.

“Where did you hear that?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows that.”

Elliott glanced at Jayesh. His friend shrugged. “I knew that,” he said.

Elora spun around to face them, continuing to fly backwards. “That only works if you tell us your full name,” she said. “But even if I wanted to cause you harm — which I don’t — I can’t do anything without magic.” She pointed to the metal band on her ankle.

“Oh, right,” Olivia said.

“I still don’t think we should tell her our names,” Jayesh added.

Elliott shrugged. It seemed rude not to tell her, especially considering she’d already shared her name, but he decided to keep their last names a secret, just to be on the safe side. “I’m Elliott,” he said. “And this is my sister, Olivia, and our friend, Jayesh.”

Elora curtsied in the air. “Pleased to meet you.”

“So, where are the other fairies?” Olivia asked her.

“Hidden under the toadstools,” Elora said. “They were too afraid to come out and talk to you, but I know that they’re thankful you’re trying to help us. If you manage to get King Grugbok to free me, then I can free them.”

Elliott’s stomach tightened. The seriousness of this quest suddenly settled over him. What if he couldn’t persuade the king to release Elora? Then they’d never get home and the fairies would remain imprisoned. While the others chattered, he was quiet, turning the problem of how to get King Grugbok to agree to take off her cuff over and over again in his mind but finding no solution.

They’d walked for almost an hour when the trees finally parted, revealing a crumbling grey stone castle on top of a rolling green hill. The castle was surrounded by spiky metal gates,

in front of which stood two squat creatures in shining suits of armour, their faces hidden underneath their helmets. Each of the creatures held a large curved sword that pointed up towards the sky.

“Those are the goblins?” Jayesh asked, his eyebrows raised.

Elora nodded.

“I didn’t think they’d be so small.”

“Small things can still be powerful,” she replied.

“And dangerous,” Elliott added. “They’ve also got swords.”

Elora rested her tiny hand on his shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, goblins aren’t terribly smart — I’m sure you can outwit them.”

It didn’t really make Elliott feel any better, actually. Especially because he still hadn’t come up with a plan.

He took a deep breath to try and relax. “I think I should go to the castle alone,” he said. There was no sense in putting them all in danger. If something bad happened to him, then at least Olivia and Jayesh could run.

Olivia shook her head. “No way. We’re in this together.”

“Elliott’s right,” Elora said. “It’s safer if you two stay here in the woods. I’ll go with him.”

“I guess if you’re sure,” Jayesh said. He sounded relieved and Elliott couldn’t blame him. He’d feel the same way if their positions were reversed.

“Okay, well. I’ll be back soon,” he said.

He hoped so, anyway.

Before he could leave, Olivia threw her arms around him and squeezed him hard. Elliott

patted her awkwardly on the back and then started across the field, Elora flying alongside him.

His heart thundered in his ears as he headed up the hill towards the guards. The sun glinted off their suits of armour, making him squint. As he got closer, one of the guards pushed up the visor on his helmet, offering Elliott a glimpse of rough green skin, two beady black eyes and an overlarge, bulbous nose.

But it was what Elliott saw through the gates that made him stop in his tracks. The castle was surrounded by a murky green moat. The wooden drawbridge had been lowered and on top of the drawbridge lay a huge black dragon, its wings folded around its scaly body.

Elliott's eyes widened. He couldn't believe he was looking at an actual dragon. It would be cool if it wasn't so terrifying.

"Don't worry, she's tied up," Elora said.

Sure enough, Elliott spotted a collar circling the dragon's thick neck. The collar was attached to a rusty chain fastened to the castle wall.

"She can still melt the skin off your bones if she breathes on you, though, so be careful not to bother her," Elora added.

Elliott didn't need to be warned — he had no intention of bothering the dragon. Of course, that didn't mean the dragon wouldn't bother him if given the chance.

Fear shot up his spine as he started to walk the last few steps towards the guards. The goblin guard with the open visor on his helmet watched him approach. He only came up to Elliott's waist, but the tip of his sword rose at least a foot past Elliott's head.

"A human," the goblin said in a low voice. "Haven't seen the likes of you in a hundred years. What are you doing in Theynia?"

"None of your business," Elora said before Elliott could answer. "We're here to see King

Grugbok.”

The goblin snorted. “If an audience with the king is what you’re after, then it most definitely *is* my business.” He reached forward and made a grab for her, but she darted out of his grasp.

Elliott smiled nervously at the goblin. “We have something we’d like to offer his majesty.”

The goblin’s eyes narrowed. “Oh yeah? And what would that be?”

Elliott blinked, his mind spinning. “Uh, I can’t really get into that, it’s top secret, but believe me, this is something that he won’t want to miss out on,” he said. “And I don’t think he’ll be very happy with you if you keep us from telling him about it.”

The goblin stared at him for a moment, considering. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll take you to the king. But mind that you don’t try anything stupid!” To illustrate his point, he lowered his sword and prodded Elliott lightly in the stomach with the tip.

He turned and gestured for Elliott and Elora to follow him through the gates. Elliott’s legs felt watery as they walked over the drawbridge towards the dragon. The dragon watched them as they carefully skirted past her tail and he couldn’t help but think about how easy it would be for her to just open her mouth and reduce them to ashes with one flaming breath.

He relaxed a little once they’d crossed through the castle’s arched entryway, although he tensed up again when he noticed several more goblin guards standing at attention in their suits of armour on either side of the room. He swallowed as it occurred to him that there would be no easy way to escape. If they tried to run, the guards would be on them in an instant.

They continued down a long hall lined with a red carpet, the only bright spot in the otherwise dark and gloomy space. When they reached a pair of tall wooden doors, the goblin

guard knocked three times. A moment later, they heard a grunt. The guard pushed open the heavy door and ushered them inside.

Elliott's stomach lurched. King Grugbok sat alone at the end of a long stone table laden with food, gnawing on a turkey leg. He grunted as his jagged yellow teeth eagerly tore the flesh from the drumstick. The king was small and green and wrinkled, with pointed ears and a pig-like nose. A gold crown studded with rubies and emeralds was perched crookedly on his bald head. He wore a white fur cape tossed over his thin shoulders, beneath which Elliott glimpsed a flash of silver — he was certain it was the key that Elora had mentioned, the one that would unlock her iron cuff.

He cleared his throat. "Excuse me, your highness?"

King Grugbok looked up from his meal, his beady eyes raking over Elliott. "How is it that you've arrived in Theynia, boy? I thought I'd sealed up all the entrances."

"We came in through a door in the mountain," Elliott said. "We didn't realize that it would bring us here."

"We?" the king asked. "You mean there is more of you?"

Elliott stiffened, chastising himself for the slip up. He didn't want the goblins to know about Olivia and Jayesh. "No, there's just me," he said, hoping the king would buy it. "The door disappeared as soon as I walked through it, but this fairy has agreed to open it for me. I'm hoping that you can help me by taking her cuff off so that she can cast the spell and I can go home."

"Is that so?" King Grugbok smiled and drummed his stubby green fingers on the table. After a moment, he nodded and motioned for Elora to come closer. She gave Elliott an uneasy glance before flying over to the king. As soon as she got near, he plucked her from the air and held her tightly in his fist.

“What are you doing?” Elliott yelled as Elora began to struggle to free herself.

The king chuckled. “Did you really think me stupid enough to release a fairy, boy?”

Elora’s face began to turn red as the king squeezed the air from her lungs. Elliott wanted to run over and help her, but the guard clamped down on his arm and held him back. He watched in horror as Elora slumped over the king’s wrist, her eyes drifting shut, her body limp.

Elliott gasped. He couldn’t just let the king kill her.

He elbowed the guard. The guard groaned and doubled over as Elliott raced over to King Grugbok.

“Guards!” the king shouted.

Elliott knew he had only moments before the king’s soldiers arrived and he was surrounded. Elora’s face had turned a deathly pale and he could only hope that it wasn’t already too late. The king tried to scramble away from him but he reached over and jerked the tiny silver key from the chain around his neck before he could get away. Elliott dropped to his knees and inserted the key into the cuff around Elora’s ankle.

The cuff instantly vanished. King Grugbok howled as Elora began stir. At the sound of his cries, the door flew open and the guards burst into the room. Elliott looked over his shoulder, his stomach tightening with panic. There was no way they’d be able to escape the guards.

And then he blinked and found himself standing on the drawbridge outside the castle. Right in front of the dragon.

“Don’t make any sudden movements,” Elora said in Elliott’s ear. She hovered in the air next to him and he realized that she’d brought them here. It had worked — she had her magic back.

“W-what are we doing here?” he asked as the dragon lifted her head, her red eyes

narrowing dangerously. She was close enough that Elliott could smell her smoky breath.

“She’s a prisoner, too,” Elora said. She made a circular motion with her hand and the collar around the dragon’s neck disappeared. A moment later, Elliott heard shouting and the sound of footsteps as a bunch of goblin guards ran down the drawbridge towards them.

“That’s our cue to leave,” Elora said. “Ready?”

Elliott nodded. He’d never been more ready for anything.

Another blink and they were standing in the grass at the edge of the forest. Olivia let out loud cry as she and Jayesh raced towards him from the trees.

“H-how did you do that?” Jayesh asked, his eyes wide. “You weren’t there a second ago.”

“Magic,” Olivia said with a grin.

The dragon roared. Elliott turned around to look back at the castle as a split of orange fire lit up the sky. One of the castle’s turrets started to burn.

“We don’t have any time to waste,” Elora said. “We need to get you back to the mountain before the goblins come after us. Quickly, you need to make a ring.”

The three of them clasped hands in a circle. Still balanced on Elliott’s arm, Elora closed her eyes and—

They were back at the mountain. They all released hands and Elora flew over and drew a rectangle on the stone. The door appeared and opened, revealing the staircase that led down to the tunnel. Elliott sagged with relief.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I should be the one thanking you,” Elora replied. “I’m going to free the other fairies and we’ll going to take our kingdom back. The goblins will never control us again.”

“I’m going to miss you,” Elliott said.

She smiled. “I’ll miss all of you, too. Now go, before the door closes up again.”

Olivia and Jayesh went first. Elliott followed after them, glancing over his shoulder at Elora. She waved goodbye just before the door swung shut.

They raced down the stairs and through the tunnel, into the forest and all the way to the campsite. When they arrived, totally out of breath, they found Elliott’s mom sitting in a camp chair in front of a roaring fire.

“What on earth took you guys so long?” she asked. “I was beginning to worry about you.”

The three of them looked at each other and laughed.

“You’d never believe us if we told you,” Elliott said.

The Tunnel in the Middle

“I don’t want to go down any of these tunnels,” Jayesh said. “I want to go back to the campsite.

Elliott held the flashlight under his chin and grinned, reminding Jayesh of a creepy Jack o’ Lantern. “Are you scared?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Yes,” Jayesh replied.

Elliott frowned and lowered the flashlight. “Aw, come on,” he said. “We’ll just go a little bit further. Don’t you want to find out where these tunnels lead?”

Jayesh shook his head. “Not even a little bit.”

“What if we let you pick the tunnel?” Olivia cajoled.

He grimaced. He didn’t know why he even bothered to try and talk his friends out of this — it was clearly two against one and there was nothing he could say that would convince them to give up and turn around. For some reason, they seemed determined to keep going deeper and deeper into the earth. He sighed heavily, already irritated at himself because he knew that he was going to give in. He didn’t want to be a buzz kill and besides, if he dug in his heels and refused to go, then they might just decide to leave him behind. He certainly didn’t want to walk back to the entrance in the dark all by himself.

“Alright, fine,” he said. “But we’re sticking to this tunnel.” At least if they continued walking in a straight line and didn’t branch off into the other tunnels then it would be impossible to get lost. “And only a little bit further and then we turn around,” he added. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Elliott and Olivia replied.

Jayesh chewed his lip nervously as they started to walk again. The air became cooler and

more damp with each step they took until he started to shiver — although maybe that had less to do with the cold and more to do with his frayed nerves. He was sure there must be spiders or worms or — even worse — bats lurking down here. The path began to narrow, forcing them to walk in single-file — Elliott in the lead, Olivia behind him and Jayesh bringing up the rear. The dirt walls closed in until they were near enough to brush either side of Jayesh’s shoulders and he began to worry that they’d get stuck like a cork in a bottle. Or what if the walls suddenly collapsed? They were deep enough in the tunnel now that if they did get trapped, he was sure that no one would hear their screams. They’d be buried alive.

A bubble of panic rose up inside him. This tunnel could very well end up as their grave! He no longer cared if his friends thought he was a buzzkill — he needed to get out of here, right now. “Okay, I think we’ve gone far enough,” he said, his heart thumping painfully against his ribs. “We need to go back before something bad—”

The flashlight sputtered and died, plunging the three of them into a nightmarish blackness.

“—happens,” Jayesh said, his stomach dropping to his toes.

“Darn,” Elliott said.

Jayesh’s breath quickened and he broke out in a sweat. “I knew we never should have come into this stupid tunnel,” he muttered as he heard Elliott knocking the Swiss Army knife against the wall, trying to get the flashlight working again.

“We’d better go back,” Olivia said.

Elliott sighed. “Yeah, I guess we’d better.”

Jayesh’s shoulders sagged with relief. Even if they had to walk in total blackness all the way back to the entrance, at least they were on their way out of here. But just as he was about to

turn around and lead them out, he heard a creaking sound. Jayesh's eyes widened as a crack of warm yellow light suddenly spilled from an open door at the end of the tunnel.

"I'll bet that door leads back to the forest," Elliott said.

Jayesh wasn't so sure. He still thought that they should turn around, just to be on the safe side, but Elliott and Olivia had already started to walk towards the light. "Wait," he called after them. "We have no idea who even opened that door! What if there's a serial killer waiting for us on the other side?"

"You watch too many horror movies," Elliott said. "The wind probably just blew it open. And this is the fastest way out of here."

Jayesh hesitated. But since he didn't want to be left behind in the dark, he followed after his friends, trying to ignore the voice in his head that was warning him they were making the wrong decision. His arms were covered in goosebumps. He prayed that Elliott was right and this door really would lead them to the forest and not to their doom.

When they reached the door, Elliott paused. Jayesh's heart began to race even faster as Elliott pushed the door open. He gasped. Instead of the trees and sky they'd been hoping for, there was a narrow room with racks and racks of clothing covered in transparent plastic garment bags.

"This is super weird," Jayesh said. "Why is there a closet at the end of a tunnel?"

"Maybe it leads to Narnia, like in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*," Olivia said excitedly.

Elliott snorted. "Narnia isn't a real place. It's probably someone's house."

"If it's someone's house, then we definitely shouldn't be going in there," Jayesh said.

"It's still the fastest way out of here," Elliott replied. Before Jayesh could stop him, he

stepped through the door and began pushing his way between the racks of clothes. Olivia looked over her shoulder at Jayesh and shrugged, then followed after her brother. Feeling like he had no other choice, Jayesh trailed after them.

He found it hard to breathe as he waded through the clothes. The combination of the plastic garment bags brushing his face and the musty, faintly smoky smell of the closet made him feel like he was suffocating. His chest felt heavy and he was desperate for air by the time he burst out of the closet and into the room where Olivia and Elliott were waiting for him.

Olivia held up one of the garment bags, beneath which Jayesh could see a lace wedding dress that must have once been white but was now a dingy yellow. She pointed out a piece of tape stuck to the plastic. Something was written on it in black ink.

“Emily Webb, Our Town,” Olivia read. She glanced at Elliott. “Our Town is a play. Mom took us to see it last year, remember?”

Elliott nodded. “I remember. Must be a costume.”

Jayesh looked around the room. Three dusty mirrors surrounded by light bulbs were mounted on the far wall. In front of each mirror was a small desk, the top of which was covered in makeup and brushes. On the other wall, there was a long shelf with a row of faceless Styrofoam mannequin heads topped with wigs of varying lengths, colours and styles.

“We’re in the dressing room of a theatre,” he said. “Although I don’t know what a theatre would be doing in the middle of the woods.”

Elliott shrugged. “Maybe we’re not in the woods anymore. The campsite isn’t that big — the tunnel must have taken us out of the forest.” He walked over and grabbed a long, curly blonde wig from one of the faceless mannequins and set it on his own head. Olivia slid the wedding dress back on the rack and picked up a glittering purple masquerade mask. She tied the

mask over her eyes, then handed a black bowler hat to Jayesh.

He knew that they probably shouldn't be touching this stuff — it wasn't theirs to mess around with, after all — but he couldn't resist trying on the hat. He looked at himself in the mirror and smiled, but the smile quickly dropped off his face when he noticed something shift in the reflection. Something — or someone — was hiding in the shadows behind them.

Jayesh spun around, his pulse racing.

“What's wrong?” Olivia asked.

“There's s-someone over there,” he whispered, gesturing to a darkened area where an old wooden ladder with a broken rung was propped against the wall. A moment later, a girl about their age stepped out from the shadows. She had long red hair with heavy bangs that were parted in the middle of her forehead like a pair of curtains. She wore jeans and a brown and white striped t-shirt with blue sneakers.

Elliott and Olivia jumped.

“Sorry,” the girl said. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

Elliott snatched the wig off his head and plopped it back onto the mannequin. “Well, you did. Why were you hiding back there?”

The girl shrugged. “I had no idea who was coming through the tunnel. I thought you might be a serial killer.”

Elliott nudged Jayesh. “Guess you're not the only one who watches too many horror movies.”

“You know about the tunnel?” Olivia asked her.

“Of course. I know everything about this theatre,” she said. “My dad's the director. I grew up hanging around here.”

Jayesh took off the bowler hat and set it back on the shelf. “We didn’t mean to barge in on you— we were just looking for a way out of the tunnel. If you can tell us where the exit is, we’ll get going.”

The girl started towards the door. “You can leave through the front of the theatre, but you don’t have to rush off. I could give you guys a tour, if you like.”

“Yes, please,” Olivia said, adjusting the purple masquerade mask. The mask was a little too big and it kept slipping, covering her eyes.

Jayesh hesitated. The red-haired girl was a total stranger, but she seemed friendly and a tour of the theatre did sound like fun. When would they ever get a chance like this again? Maybe they didn’t need to rush off.

“That would be great,” he said.

She smiled. “I’m Elora, by the way.”

“Jayesh,” he said. “And this is Elliott and Olivia.”

“Nice to meet all of you.” Elora gestured for them to follow her and she walked out of the room. The three of them hurried after her. She led them down a short hall and into a dimly-lit backstage area. A thick red curtain hung from the ceiling that kept this part of the theatre concealed from the audience until the show was ready to go on. The set was spare, consisting of a cloth backdrop with a painted scene of a white-steepled church on top of a rolling green hill and a dozen plain wooden chairs placed in neat rows facing in the direction of the audience. Jayesh looked up at the ceiling. A bunch of heavy, industrial lights hung from a grid. None of the lights were turned on.

“Check this out,” Elora said. She crossed the scuffed-black floor and slipped through the curtain. Jayesh grinned as he followed after her. He’d always wondered what it would be like to

be on stage, how it would feel to perform in front of an audience. Of course, there was no one sitting in the red velvet seats right now. At least, he didn't think anyone was there — the theatre was so dark, he couldn't see past the first few rows. But as he walked down to the end of the stage, a strange sensation came over him. He shivered. He had the same creeped-out feeling that he'd had in the dressing room, when Elora had been hiding in the shadows - that horrible feeling that someone was watching them.

His stomach tightened as he noticed Elora's eyes flick towards the balcony. He followed her gaze. A man was looking down at them, his hands tightly gripping the balcony railing. He was wearing a white dress shirt and suspenders. From this distance, his features were blurry, but Jayesh could see that he had blonde hair and a bushy beard.

Jayesh swallowed. Something about the man and the intense way that he was staring at them made the hair on the back of his neck rise. "Who is that?" he asked.

"Oh, that's just Gerald," Elora replied. "Don't worry about him. I don't think he'll bother you."

"You don't *think* he'll bother us?" Jayesh glanced over at her as Elliott and Olivia walked up beside him.

"He's usually pretty harmless. Most ghosts are," she added.

Jayesh blinked. "Wait. Are you saying that man is a ghost?"

Elora nodded. "A lot of theatres are haunted. This one is no different."

Olivia's brow furrowed. Her mask slipped down her nose and she reached up to adjust it again. "What happened to him? I mean, how did he die?"

"Gerald was an actor," Elora said. "One night, a long time ago, a fire broke out during a performance. He jumped off the stage and tried to help everyone in the audience get out safely,

but he waited too long to save himself. He died of smoke inhalation. The firefighters found him on the balcony.” She sighed. “His ghost started showing up when the theatre was rebuilt a few years later.”

Jayesh forced himself to look back up at the balcony, but the bearded man had disappeared. He frowned. Had they actually seen a ghost or was Elora just playing a trick on them? Maybe this was just part of the tour, something to make the theatre seem more interesting. *Gerald’s probably just someone who works here, he reassured himself. He probably walked away when we weren’t looking. Ghosts aren’t real.*

But he didn’t really believe that. And when the temperature of the air suddenly dropped a moment later and a breeze blew past them, the blast strong enough to ruffle their hair, Jayesh yelped. His stomach tightened as every light in the theatre flickered to life. Behind them, the curtain began to rise. The organ in the orchestra pit started to play a haunting melody, but when Jayesh peered down into the pit, there was no one sitting at the organ — the keys were moving on their own.

“W-what’s happening?” Olivia cried as the seats of the red velvet chairs started to flap up and down, hundreds of them all together, creating a sound like roaring applause. Elliott and Jayesh exchanged a terrified glance, both of them frozen in place. Jayesh knew Elliott wasn’t afraid of much, so the fact that his friend was clearly scared amped up his own fear.

“Gerald! Stop it!” Elora yelled, glaring up at the balcony as the wind whipped around them.

Elliott’s eyes widened. “Look out!” he yelled as one of the heavy lights above Jayesh’s head fell from the ceiling. Olivia squealed as Jayesh jumped out of the way and covered his face just as the light crashed onto the stage, spraying pieces of glass everywhere. He cried out as one

of the shards ricocheted off his leg. Blood trickled down his shin and onto the top of his sneaker.

“I’m so sorry,” Elora said, wringing her hands. “Gerald doesn’t usually act like this, I swear. Are you alright?”

Jayesh shook his head, his heartbeat thrashing in his chest. He definitely was not okay — a ghost had just tried to kill him! If he hadn’t managed to get out of the way, that light would have split his head open.

A moment later, Olivia screamed as another light dropped from the ceiling, this one narrowly missing Elliott. “That’s it,” Elliott said, grabbing his sister’s hand. “We’re out of here.” He and Olivia bolted down the stage stairs and up the aisle towards the front of the theatre. Jayesh and Elora ran after them as lights started to drop like bombs on the stage behind them. The theatre was filled with the sound of breaking glass and the continued clapping of the seats.

The four of them burst through the doors and into the lobby — and right into a wall of smoke. Thick, acrid smoke that made Jayesh’s eyes sting as badly as the wound on his leg. They all started to cough and automatically dropped to their knees. It was stiflingly hot. Jayesh could hear the terrifying crackle of flames but he couldn’t see anything through the fog of smoke.

“Why aren’t the fire alarms going off?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Elliott replied. “Why didn’t we smell any smoke before we came into the lobby?”

Jayesh had no idea nor did he really care at that particular moment. He just wanted to get out of the theatre before they ended up like Gerald, dead from smoke inhalation and stuck haunting this theatre forever.

“This way,” Elora said. They followed behind her, crawling across the faded blue carpet. Jayesh couldn’t stop coughing — his throat felt raw and tears streamed from his irritated eyes.

He felt like he was going to choke.

Elora finally stopped in front of a glass door. Jayesh reached past her and yanked on the handle, but the door didn't move. He stood up and jiggled the lock, then threw all his weight against the door, but it remained shut. "It's stuck!" he cried.

Olivia let out a whimper.

"Maybe we can break the glass," Elliott said.

"We don't need to do that, there's another door over here," Elora said. She crawled away, disappearing into the smoke. Jayesh dropped to his knees again, panicking that she was no longer in his sight. They couldn't lose her, she knew her way around the theatre. He and his friends quickly caught up to her. When Jayesh saw her sitting in front of an open door, he felt weak with relief.

They stood up and stumbled outside and into the empty parking lot, putting distance between themselves and the burning building. Jayesh drew in a big gulp of fresh air. He was so happy to have made it out of the theatre alive that it took him a moment to realize that night had fallen. The sky was black and starless, the moon full and bright.

His brow furrowed. "How can it be night time already? It was still light out when we went into the tunnel."

"Weird," Elliott said. "It doesn't feel like we've been gone that long."

"Mom's going to kill us," Olivia said, her voice quivering. She'd lost the masquerade mask at some point on the way out of the theatre and her short blonde hair stuck up in every direction.

Jayesh grimaced. They were going to be in trouble for sure, but they had more pressing matters to worry about right now. Like the fact that a fire was currently destroying the theatre.

“We need to find a way to call the fire department,” he said, looking back at the old wooden building. He did a double take. From the outside, the theatre looked perfectly normal. There was no sign that a fire was raging inside - no smoke pouring from the open door, nothing to indicate that the building was in danger of burning to the ground.

“Uh, guys?” he said.

Elliott, Elora and Olivia turned around.

Olivia gasped. “But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“None of this makes any sense,” Elliott said, rubbing his forehead.

“It’s Gerald,” Elora said with a sigh. “He gets trapped in the memory of the fire sometimes. He was trying to get us to leave.”

Olivia crossed her arms. “Well, he could have just told us to leave instead of scaring us half to death.”

“So, you’re saying the fire wasn’t even real?” Elliott asked Elora.

She shook her head.

“It sure felt real to me,” Jayesh said, recalling the searing heat from the flames and the thick smoke filling his lungs. He frowned. Now that he thought about it, his throat no longer hurt and his eyes had stopped burning. He glanced down at his shin in shock. The blood was gone and his wound had mysteriously healed. How was that possible? He’d felt the glass tear into his skin when the light shattered on the stage. He’d felt the blood running down his leg.

How was *any* of this possible?

“This is too creepy,” Elliott said, shaking his head. “We need to go back to the campsite.”

Jayesh nodded. But as he surveyed the cornfields surrounding the theatre, his heart sank. It seemed like they were in the middle of nowhere. The campsite could be miles from here.

“How are we going to get back there when we have no idea which direction to take?”

Elora smiled. “I know that campsite. I’ll walk you back there,” she said.

Jayesh, Olivia and Elliott followed her into the cornfield. There wasn’t a distinct path, just narrow rows of corn stalks that towered over them. Feeling uneasy, Jayesh started to sweat again as the long green leaves slapped against his bare arms and legs. Walking through a corn field was unsettling and, he soon realized, easy to get lost in, especially at night. He was grateful Elora had agreed to lead them to the campsite, because he knew there was no way they’d be able to find their way back otherwise.

They hadn’t gone too far when they heard a howl. The sound was close enough to stop them in their tracks.

“What was that?” Jayesh asked.

Olivia turned around to look at him, her eyes wide with fear. “I think it was a werewolf.”

“It’s not a werewolf. It’s probably just a coyote,” Elora said. “Don’t worry, they’re pretty harmless.”

“That’s what you said about Gerald,” Jayesh reminded her. The words were barely out of his mouth when the animal started to growl. Tensing, Jayesh peeked over his shoulder. Two red eyes stared at them from between the corn stalks.

His friends screamed and immediately scattered, running in different directions as they disappeared into the field.

“Wait!” Jayesh called as he ran after them, certain that he’d feel the animal’s teeth sinking into him at any second. The sound of it snarling behind him pushed Jayesh to move faster. He tore through the field, the leaves on the corn stalks smacking him repeatedly in the face. He dared a quick look over his shoulder, letting out a strangled scream when he caught

sight of a giant black beast racing after him, its sharp teeth bared.

Definitely not a coyote, he thought, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. Whatever the animal was, if it got a hold of him it would surely tear him to shreds.

Jayesh faced forward again, but he was quickly knocked off his feet as he collided with something. He laid sprawled in the dirt with his eyes screwed tightly shut, waiting in paralyzed fear for the animal to attack him, but the growls suddenly ceased. After a few moments of silence, Jayesh nervously cracked open his eyes, afraid to see exactly what it was that he'd run into. He inhaled sharply at the sight of a man in a straw hat standing over him, but then let out a relieved breath. It was just a burlap scarecrow. Jayesh sat up, noticing that the addition of a bushy beard and suspenders made the scarecrow look just like Gerald the ghost.

He shuddered and pulled himself to his feet.

"Elliott?" he whispered-called, afraid that the beast would hear him and come back.

"Olivia? Where are you guys?"

"We're over here," Olivia called back.

Jayesh followed the sound of her voice and stumbled out of the cornfield. His friends were sitting in the grass near the entrance sign for the campsite.

"Where's Elora?" he asked as he walked over to them.

"She hasn't come out yet," Elliott said.

Jayesh looked back at the cornfield and chewed his lip. "We have to find her," he said. Going back in there was the very last thing he wanted to do, but they couldn't just leave her. What if the beast got her?

"You guys wait here," he said. There was no sense in putting them all in danger. If something bad happened to him, then at least Olivia and Elliott could run. He swallowed and

started back towards the cornfield when Elora suddenly walked out from between the stalks.

“You’re safe now,” she said, smiling at him. “You know the way from here.”

Jayesh nodded. “Thanks for getting us—” The rest of the words died in his throat as he realized that he could see right through her — her body had become completely transparent, revealing the rustling cornstalks behind her.

Elora looked down at herself and shrugged. “Guess it’s time for me to go,” she said wistfully. “It’s been fun hanging out with you guys.”

And with that, she vanished into the air.

As if a switch had been flipped, the sky changed back to a brilliant blue and it was day again. Elliott and Olivia walked up beside Jayesh.

“Did all of that just happen?” Elliott said.

Olivia nodded. “We couldn’t have all imagined it, could we?”

Jayesh didn’t have an answer, but he knew one thing for sure — he wanted to get back to leave this behind and get back to the campsite, and civilization, as soon as possible.

The Tunnel on the Right

Olivia's eyes widened as she saw a flash of light coming from deep inside the right tunnel, like the twinkle of a star in the night sky.

"Did you guys see that?" she asked.

Elliott looked over at her. "See what?"

"All I see is darkness," Jayesh said.

Olivia frowned. The light had disappeared. "There's something down there," she insisted. She reached over and grabbed the flashlight from Elliott's hand, then started down the path.

"Liv, wait," Elliott called after her, his voice tight. Olivia knew that her brother was annoyed because she'd made the decision about which direction they should take — he always liked to be the leader, the one in charge. *Well, he may be a year older than me, but that doesn't mean I always have to follow him*, she thought to herself.

Behind her, she heard the rush of Elliott and Jayesh's footsteps on the hard dirt as they hurried to catch up. The three of them hadn't gone too far when the path started to curve. It curved again and again and again, until Olivia realized that they were walking in a spiral. Her heart sank. Her eyes must have had been playing tricks on her — the rounded walls of the tunnel surely would have blocked any light from reaching them at the entrance. Feeling disappointed — and a little foolish — she was about to give in and admit that she'd been mistaken, that she couldn't actually have seen a light, when a thought occurred to her.

Olivia stopped short, causing Elliott and Jayesh to almost bump into her. "I think we're in a labyrinth," she said.

"What's a labyrinth?" Elliott asked.

“It’s basically a maze.”

He snorted. “Then why didn’t you just say maze?”

Even though he was behind her, Olivia knew that her brother was rolling his eyes. Well, he could make fun of her all he liked, but in her opinion, he was the annoying one — if he’d read *The Battle of the Labyrinth* then he wouldn’t have had to ask her what it was.

She scanned the flashlight over the walls as they continued walking. “Why would someone build a labyrinth inside a tunnel, where no one could find it?” she asked.

“We found it,” Elliott pointed out.

“True, but whoever built it obviously must have wanted to keep it hidden for some reason,” Jayesh said. “Which means that they probably don’t want people messing around down here. We should go back before we get caught.”

“No way,” Elliott said. “We can’t leave yet. We need to see what’s at the end of the maze. And I don’t think we’re going to run into anyone. I think this place is deserted.”

“Just because you think it’s deserted doesn’t mean that it is,” Jayesh grumbled. “What if we run into a bear or something?”

Just then, the beam of the flashlight glinted off a small silver disk mounted on the wall. Olivia’s breath caught. “Look,” she said, walking over to inspect the disc. The metal was engraved with a series of numbers, all 0’s and 1’s.

“It’s binary code,” Jayesh said.

“What does it say?” Elliott asked him.

Jayesh laughed. “How would I know? I’m not a computer. I know binary code when I see it, but I can’t read it.”

Olivia ran her fingers over the disc. Suddenly, a long strip of tiny white lights set into

either side of the dirt floor flicked on, lighting up the path like the lights on an airport runway. The lights led all the way to a huge glass elevator at the end of the tunnel.

“Whoa,” Elliott said.

“Weird. Why would there be an elevator down here?” Jayesh asked.

“Maybe it’s like the great glass elevator in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,” Olivia said excitedly.

“Willy Wonka and his chocolate factory don’t actually exist,” Elliott reminded her. “It’ll probably just take us back to the forest.”

As Olivia started to walk towards the elevator, Jayesh grabbed the tail of her t-shirt to hold her back.

“You’re not actually thinking of going in there, right?” he asked.

Olivia glanced over her shoulder at him. “Why not?”

“Why not?” Jayesh sputtered. “I can think of a hundred reasons why not! For one thing, despite what Elliott just said, we’re not sure that elevator actually goes to the forest. But even if he’s right and it does lead there, what if it stops halfway and we get stuck? No one even knows we’re down here! We’ll be trapped!”

“That’s really only two reasons,” Elliott said.

Jayesh shook his head. “It’s a very bad idea.”

Olivia couldn’t argue that he’d made some good points — she definitely didn’t want to get stuck underground — but curiosity got the better of her, as it usually did. She rushed over and pushed the call button. The elevator dinged and the doors whooshed open. Olivia and Elliott stepped inside and turned to look back at Jayesh.

“Are you coming?” Elliott asked him.

Jayesh scowled but he walked into the elevator after them.

Olivia glanced around. The entire elevator was made of glass. Because they were underground, all she could see was dirt, aside from a thin beam of light pouring in from the ceiling. Strangely, there was only one button on the control panel, instead of different buttons that would take them to different floors, and it was marked with 1011000 in red digital numbers.

“More binary code,” Elliott said.

Before she stopped to think about what she was doing, Olivia pushed the button.

“I really wish you hadn’t done that,” Jayesh cried as the doors slid closed, sealing them inside.

The three of them huddled together as the elevator started to move. It picked up speed, shooting upwards so fast that Olivia felt nauseous. The dirt walls soon disappeared as they left the tunnel behind and light flooded through the glass, the brightness making Olivia’s eyes tear.

“Well, this is definitely not the way back to the forest,” Elliott said as they continued to climb higher. They were moving at such a rapid pace that everything outside of the elevator was a blur of color. When the elevator finally started to slow down, Olivia realized that they were travelling through the centre of a building. A crowd of people — hundreds of them on each floor — surrounded the elevator, staring in at them as they passed by. Olivia’s palms started to sweat. There was something unsettling about the way the people were watching them, like they were monkeys in a cage. But even more strange was the people themselves — although they had different color hair and skin tones and were wearing different clothes, they were all the same height and they all looked oddly alike.

Elliott pressed his face against the glass and stared back at them. “What is this place?” he asked.

“I think it’s some kind of office building,” she answered.

Jayesh chewed his lip. “An office building in the middle of the forest?”

She shrugged. It did seem weird. Just as weird as finding a labyrinth with an elevator at the end of it.

The elevator started to slow even more. A few seconds later, it glided to a stop and the doors opened, revealing a white, windowless room. A woman with a neat red bob and big, amber-colored eyes waited for them. Olivia swallowed. She looked just like the other people that she’d noticed on the way up.

“Hello,” the woman said. She stood with her hands clasped in front of her. She was wearing a long, white coat.

“Um, hi.” Olivia’s cheeks burned. She figured they were about to get into big trouble. “We’re sorry,” she said. “We shouldn’t have come up here.”

“No need to apologize, Olivia.” The woman smiled, revealing a row of perfectly straight teeth. “We’re happy that you’ve joined us.”

Olivia gasped. “H-how do you know my name?”

The woman’s smile widened. “I know all of your names,” she said. “You were scanned and identified on your way up here. We have all your vitals, your birthdays, your histories. We know everything about you.”

“That’s creepy,” Elliott said.

Olivia started to tremble. Her brother was right — it was super creepy that this woman they’d never met before knew who they were while they knew nothing about her or this place.

But if Elliott had offended her, the woman didn’t show it. She just moved off to the side and gestured for them to step out of the elevator. “My name is Elora. I’ve been assigned to take

care of you.”

Take care of us? Olivia wondered.

Jayesh cleared his throat. “Oh, that’s really nice, but we’re not staying,” he said. “We’re just going to go back down the elevator and get out of your—”

“You’re not going anywhere just yet,” Elora interrupted him. “Follow me, please.”

Despite her smile, her words sounded like an order, not a request. Olivia glanced at the elevator button. The digital numbers now read zero. She jabbed the button, hoping that the doors would close and they’d be whisked back down to the tunnel, but nothing happened.

“The elevator has been locked,” Elora said. “It won’t go anywhere else unless you punch in the code.”

“What are the chances that you’ll give us the code?” Jayesh asked her.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” she replied. “But please don’t worry. We don’t intend to harm you.”

Olivia grimaced. It didn’t seem like they had much choice —they had to go with her. Her heart pounded as she stepped into the room, hoping that they’d somehow find another exit out of the building.

“I told you guys taking the elevator was a bad idea,” Jayesh hissed under his breath as he and Elliott followed behind her.

Olivia’s throat felt thick. This was all her fault — after all, she was the one who’d pushed the button that brought them up here.

“This way,” Elora said.

She led them across the room and into a long corridor lined with windows. Olivia’s eyes widened. They were surrounded by buildings, in the middle of a city, only it didn’t look like any

city that she'd ever seen before. Steel towers of all different shapes — spirals and oblongs and one building that looked as if it had been made from Lego blocks — stretched so high into the sky that they disappeared into the clouds.

“Look at all the helicopters,” Elliott said, pointing to a bunch of silver and black aircrafts weaving in and out between the towers.

Olivia's chest tightened. Those didn't look like helicopters to her...in fact, they looked more like...

Jayesh gasped. “They're flying cars!”

“No way,” Elliott said, pressing his nose against the glass.

Olivia glanced at Elora, her heart racing even faster. “Where are we?” she asked her.

“You're in the same place you came from,” Elora replied. “Give or take a thousand years.”

Olivia's eyebrows shot up. “A thousand *years*? Are you saying that we took an elevator a thousand years into the future?”

Elora nodded.

“But that's not possible.” Jayesh's lower lip trembled as he stared out the window at the strange city and the flying cars. He screwed his eyes shut. “This is just a dream. Just a dream. I'm going to wake up at any moment.”

“We can't all be having the same dream,” Elliott pointed out.

“It's not a dream,” Elora said. “The elevator is a portal. We've been using it to go back and forth between our time periods for centuries. We did our best to hide the entrance, although we knew that it was possible that humans might stumble across it one day.” She smiled. “I've been hoping someone would find it.”

Olivia frowned. Elora had referred to them as humans, which was weird. She thought of the people she'd seen on the way up here, how strangely similar they'd all seemed, and her skin began to prickle.

She swallowed. Maybe they looked so much alike because they weren't people at all. Maybe they were something else entirely.

"Are you an alien?" Olivia asked her.

"Definitely not," Elora said. "I'm an android."

Olivia gaped at her. "You're a robot?"

"Wait, what?" Jayesh squeaked.

"Well, we prefer to be called androids, but yes, in the most basic terms, I am a robot," Elora said. "We were created by humans many centuries ago. After you went extinct, we—"

"We're extinct?" Olivia interrupted.

Elora nodded. "The last of you died out in the early 2400s."

"Died out or they killed us off?" Jayesh whispered in Olivia's ear.

Olivia shuddered. She had the same swoopy feeling in her stomach as she'd had when the elevator started to rise. If what Elora said was true, then they were the only humans alive in this time period. She started to shake. Where was Elora taking them? And what would happen to them when they got there?

She didn't have to wait long to find out. They passed in front of a glass wall, behind which was a small room that contained a grey plaid couch and two matching chairs, a red throw rug, a coffee table and a couple of plants. Elora stopped in front of the glass door that led into the room. A red laser scanned her entire body and the door clicked open.

"We've spent years debating whether we should bring humans back," she said, ushering

them inside. “We’ve been divided on the issue, but since you’ve come to us, I don’t think anyone will object.”

“Object to what?” Olivia asked.

Elora clasped her hands in front of her. “So far, all of our research on humans has been conducted in the wild,” she answered. “But we’ve been preparing our labs for the day we’re finally given the green light to study humans up close, in captivity. Since you arrived here on your own, I’m sure no one would mind if we keep you.”

“Keep us?” Jayesh said, his eyebrows flying up his forehead. “I mind if you keep us! We’re not going to stay—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Elora stepped out of the room and closed the door firmly behind her, trapping them inside.

“Hey!” Elliott yelled. He ran forward and started tugging on the door handle, but it was no use — they were locked in. “We’re not going to be your lab rats! Let us out!”

“It won’t be so bad,” Elora assured him. “I promise, I’m going to do my best to make life comfortable for you.”

Olivia and Jayesh started pounding on the glass, too.

“You can’t keep us here,” Olivia said, tears pricking her eyes. She thought of her mother, waiting at the campsite, wondering what was taking them so long, completely unaware that her kids had accidentally travelled forward a thousand years in time and were now being held hostage by a robot. “You have to let us go home.”

“I’m afraid that’s not up to me,” Elora said.

“Then who is it up to?” Elliott cried. “Who’s in charge?”

“The council. But they’re very busy. And I don’t think—”

“Please. We need to talk to them,” Olivia said.

Elora shook her head. “The council won’t come all the way out here. But even if I did somehow convince them to come, I know that they would agree that keeping you is in the best interests of our research.”

Elliott crossed his arms. “We’re not research, we’re kids.”

“What happens if we don’t cooperate?” Olivia asked her.

Elora cocked her head. “I hope that once you’ve calmed down, you’ll realize that this is a great honour,” she said. “Once our team has finished studying your habits, we’ll make some improvements to your physiology and hopefully create a new, better form of human.”

Olivia’s chest tightened. “You’re going to turn us into cyborgs?”

“What’s a cyborg?” Elliott asked Olivia.

“It’s a half-human, half robot,” she replied, dread settling over her as she wondered exactly how they’d transform her body — would they replace her bones with steel? Would they give her eyes that could shoot lasers? Would they put a computer chip into her brain?

“It’s nothing to be afraid of,” Elora said. “The enhancements will greatly improve your lives. Now, I’ll let you get settled. I’ll be back to check on you shortly.”

“Wait!” Elliott called after her as she walked away. “What if we have to go to the bathroom?” He turned and looked at Olivia and Jayesh, his eyes wild. “What are we going to do?”

“We’ll just have to hold it for now, I guess,” Jayesh replied dully.

Elliott snorted. “I meant, how are we going to get out of here!”

“When Elora comes back, we’ll just have to make her understand that they can’t do this to us,” Olivia said. “She has to know that it’s wrong to keep us here.”

Jayesh scrubbed a hand through his hair. “That’s not going to work,” he said. “She’s a robot — she doesn’t have feelings. To her, we’re just test subjects. We’re like flies trapped in a spider’s web.” His jaw suddenly went slack. “How do you think they’re going to ‘enhance’ us, anyway? Do you think that means they’re going to operate on us?”

Elliott shuddered.

“They’re not going to operate on us because we’re going to get out of here before they can touch us,” Olivia said. She sounded a lot more confident about this than she felt.

“And how do you expect we’ll get back to our own time period, if we can’t go down the elevator?” Jayesh said.

She bit her lip. “I don’t know. But we have to find a way. We can’t just let them do this to us.” She glanced around the room, hoping to find something that might help them get out of this cell. She noticed a pinprick of red light shining in the corner of the ceiling.

She narrowed her eyes. “You guys, I think they’re filming us,” she said. She turned in a circle and, sure enough, she found more red lights — twelve of them in all, placed in different areas of the room.

“So, they’re going to watch us all day, too?” Jayesh asked.

Elliott plunked down on the couch and crossed his arms. “Let’s just sit down and do nothing until they get bored of watching us.”

Jayesh sighed and sank down beside him. “We’re going to die in here, aren’t we?”

“Don’t say that!” Olivia admonished.

Elliott groaned. “They’re going to turn us into Transformers,” he said, burying his face in his hands. He suddenly stiffened and looked up again, like something had just occurred to him. “Wait...robots don’t eat! They won’t have any food for us. Which means you’re right—” he

turned and glanced at Jayesh. “We’re going to starve to death.”

“Maybe we can eat the plants,” Jayesh suggested. He leaned over and grabbed a leaf from the fern in the ceramic pot beside the couch. His face fell. “It’s plastic.”

Just then, a group of androids appeared on the other side of the glass. A mix of men and women, all the same height, all dressed in white lab coats. The androids watched them, but Olivia, Elliott and Jayesh sat side-by-side on the couch, not moving, not talking to each other, not doing anything, until the androids eventually left.

“We need to find a way out of here,” Olivia muttered.

“There is no way out of here,” Jayesh replied. “We’re never going to outsmart them. They’re robots! They’re, like, a million times more intelligent than we are.”

“Well, we can’t just give up!” she said.

The three of them lapsed into silence, lost in their own worries, until Elora returned a few minutes later. She opened a small flap at the bottom of the door and slid a silver bowl of red apples through. “I heard you talking about food. I hope this fruit is okay. It’s all we have. I’ll try and find something else for you later.”

Elliott scowled at her. “Great, so you’re not only watching us but you’re listening to us too,” he said coldly.

Olivia stood up and walked over to the glass to stand in front of Elora. “It’s not right to keep us locked up like this,” she said to her. “Our families are waiting for us. Don’t you have a family?”

Elora shook her head. Olivia knew that Jayesh was probably right, that robots didn’t have feelings, but she could have sworn that she saw a flicker of sympathy in Elora’s eyes.

“Isn’t there someone who would miss you if you were gone?” Olivia asked her.

“This is pointless,” Jayesh grumbled. “She doesn’t understand.”

“I have a friend,” Elora replied. “She would miss me, I think.”

“I’m sure she would! And you would miss her, too, if she was gone,” Olivia said. “So, please. Let us go home.”

Elora’s eyebrows drew together. She turned her head to look down the hall, distracted by a sudden noise. “They’re coming for you now.”

Olivia swallowed. “Who’s coming for us?”

“The doctors,” Elora replied. “They’re going to take you for some tests.”

Jayesh whimpered. “What kind of tests? Are they going to stick us with needles?”

A dark-haired android appeared. Elora unlocked the door for him, and he stepped inside the room.

“We’re not going anywhere with you,” Elliott said.

The android walked towards the couch, reached down and lifted Elliott up by his arm. Elliott howled as he was dragged towards the door and pitched out of the room. The android came back to retrieve Jayesh and Olivia, but they hopped off the couch before he could grab them. They hurried past him and out the door.

The android started to follow them, but Olivia slammed the door shut, trapping him inside the room. The android stood on the other side of the glass, looking at her in confusion.

“Please,” Olivia said, turning to Elora. “Let us go home.”

For a long moment, Elora just stared at her. Olivia was sure that she was going to say no, that she’d open the door and let the android out and they’d be taken to an operating room and given lasers for eyes.

But to her relief, Elora nodded. “Maybe you’re right — maybe it’s wrong to keep you

here.” She hesitated for another moment, then said, “The elevator code is 0001. But you’d better hurry — the others will soon discover you’re gone and they will come after you.”

“Thank you,” Olivia called over her shoulder as she and Jayesh and Elliott raced down the hall. They’d just rounded the corner into the windowless room when she heard the sound of footsteps behind them.

“They’re coming!” Elliott yelled as an alarm began to sound.

The elevator was just up ahead. Fortunately, the doors were still open. The three of them dashed inside and Olivia started to punch in the code. A loud beep let her know that she’d gotten the code wrong.

“Hurry, Liv!” Elliott said as a blond android started to rush towards them.

Olivia’s hands shook as she put the code in again. This time, the elevator doors closed — and not a moment too soon. Another second and the android would have reached them.

She held her breath as they started to descend. The crowds of androids watched them again as they passed, but this time, their faces looked less friendly. Olivia was terrified that they’d override the elevator and bring them back up, but they made it down to the tunnel without incident.

“And you said robots don’t have feelings,” she said to Jayesh as they walked back through the labyrinth.

He shrugged. “What do I know about robots?”

“I’m just glad you were able to convince Elora to help us,” Elliott said to Olivia. “If you hadn’t, then they’d probably be putting chips in our brains right now.”

Olivia beamed. She knew her brother hadn’t been thrilled when she’d tagged along with him and Jayesh this afternoon, so it felt good to know that he appreciated that she’d gotten them

out of this sticky situation.

“You’re. Welcome,” she said in her robot voice.

Elliott rolled his eyes, but then he laughed and slung his arm around her shoulders as they walked back to the campsite.