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Stuck In a Video Game

The silvery moonlight flooded through the window and glimmered on the floor of Bethany's room. The house was absolutely silent, as if it had been frozen. The only sound was the occasional snore and the deep breathing of Bethany's slumbering family. But Bethany's eyes were wide open. The digital clock on her bedside table read midnight, but she wasn't sleeping. Her hazel eyes glinted in the soft light shining from her computer screen. Her fingers danced over the clicking keyboard, with one hand on her constantly moving mouse. On her computer screen, she was playing her favorite video game: Minecraft.

You may wonder how disobedient this twelve-year-old girl must be if she was staying up late in the middle of the night to play video games. But, if you have ever played Minecraft before, her behavior was perfectly understandable. Minecraft *is* really a rather addicting game.

Her hazel eyes stared unblinkingly at the screen, her ruffled blonde hair disheveled. Her eyes were stinging painfully from watching the computer too long, but she ignored the pain. Her video game was much, much more important than her eyes, she assured herself, absently rubbing her knuckles into her eye sockets.

And so, for the next three hours, she sat in her chair and stared at the computer instead of sleeping like she was supposed to. She frowned at the keyboard. How loud the clicking was as she tapped each key! She glanced furtively toward her closed door, but the rest of her family was still sleeping soundly. If her parents found out what she was doing, they would be sure to ground her for days, weeks, possibly months! She couldn't let them find out .

Finally, at three o'clock in the morning, Bethany had to admit that a sudden, persistent wave of exhaustion was beginning to overtake her. Blinking against her clouded eyes and trying to focus her vision on the computer screen, she tried not to fall asleep. But the welcoming urge of sleep was too strong, and Bethany slipped into a black unconsciousness.

When she woke, a sharp, unnatural daylight was shining onto her face. Her eyes unfocused, Bethany felt prickly grass against her body. Tugging back her tangled hair, she dragged herself into a sitting position and stared around. She expected to see her familiar, cluttered room, but her eyes presented her with entirely unfamiliar surroundings. Bethany looked around in horror. She had no idea where she was. Maybe she was still half-dreaming; maybe she was just imagining things. Collapsing back against the rough ground, she squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. She still wasn't in her room anymore. She did not see her narrow bed, or her wooden desk, or her computer monitor. Instead, she saw . . .

Blocks. Large, square blocks. Scrambling to her feet and tugging her fluffy bathrobe more tightly around herself, Bethany scanned her surroundings. She seemed to be on a sort of hill made out of grass blocks. Nearby, she could see a large lake filled with unnaturally dark blue water. Strange, stiff cows trotted awkwardly across the grassland, their movements short and

jerky. In the distance, Bethany could see a thick, dense jungle biome with towering trees and hanging vines.

She was in the middle of a Minecraft video game.

Surely it had to be a dream. How could she possibly have been teleported inside a video game? Bethany pinched her forearm. Nothing happened. She did not wake up in her bedroom. Bethany pinched her arm harder, so hard that the chunk of flesh between her fingers flushed red, but to no avail.

Suppressing her bewilderment and panic that bubbled up inside of her, Bethany headed toward one of the grazing cows, not sure which direction to go in. The plump brown animal stared up at her with sleepy black eyes and shuffled away with a grunt. Bethany watched it with astonishment for a moment, then turned and headed toward the large lake. Suddenly, the unnatural blue daylight blazing from the sky turned a soft orange color. Glancing toward the blocky horizon, Bethany realized that the sun was going down. "Oh, no," she murmured aloud, because she knew perfectly well that when night fell, the monsters came out.

But the monsters can't harm me if this is a dream, Bethany pointed out to herself. *But what if this isn't a dream?* Bethany wondered. *What if this is real? What if I'm actually stuck in a video game?* Groping her way through the pitch darkness of the night, she headed in what she thought was the direction of the lake.

She stumbled on an uneven patch of grass and tripped. Clambering to her feet, she heard a soft hissing noise and a flash of green. She had barely enough time to glimpse a pair of cold black eyes before a deafening boom split the silent night and she was blasted backward into the air. She landed on the dirt with a soft thump, knocking the wind from her lungs, and grazed her elbow on the prickly grass. "Stupid creepers," she grumbled, dragging herself to her feet. How could she have forgotten the dangerous, explosive monsters?

As she brushed the clumps of clinging dirt off her robe, a deep, grumbling voice spoke behind her: "You want to be careful around those creepers."

Bethany whipped around and looked at the person who had spoken . . . well, it wasn't exactly a person. He had a large, oversized square head with two unnaturally bright eyes. He wore a simple, solid blue shirt and dark jeans. His arms had no hands; they simply ended in stumps. Despite the fact that he had no fingers, he was gripping an iron pickaxe in one hand. Bethany stared openmouthed at this unrealistic newcomer, unable to pry her eyes away.

The newcomer shifted awkwardly at her hazel-eyed gaze. "Hello," he muttered uncomfortably. "My name is Steve."

"Um . . . hi," Bethany replied, forcing herself to meet his glowing blue eyes. "I'm Bethany."

"You look so smooth and rounded compared to this blocky world! Where do you come from, Bethany?" Steve questioned, his eyes lingering on her tangled golden hair streaked with dark brown.

Bethany self-consciously smoothed her hair with the palm of her hand. "I come . . ." Her words trailed off, lost on the tip of her tongue. What could she say? Steve probably wouldn't

believe her, but what was the harm in telling him the truth? “I come from another world—a *real* world.” Catching what she assumed was a bewildered expression on Steve’s face (it was rather hard to tell with his blocky features), she added hastily, “Not that this world isn’t real. It certainly is, but this is actually a *video game* in my world.”

“So . . . I live in a video game?” Steve said disbelievingly. He frowned at her as though he worried she was losing her sanity, but then he shrugged and asked her, “Then how did you get here to my world?”

“I honestly don’t know, Steve,” Bethany confessed. “I fell asleep at my computer when I was playing this game, and when I woke up, I was here. I’m not even sure whether this is a dream or not. I don’t know how to get back. What if I’m stuck here forever?”

The confusion in Steve’s eyes switched to sympathy. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you return back to your world.”

“But how?” Bethany demanded.

Steve glanced thoughtfully at the glinting iron pickaxe in his stump of a hand, then raised his blue-eyed gaze to frown at the velvety carpet of stars stretched above their heads. “I will take you to see The Oracle,” he decided at last. At Bethany’s questioning glance, he explained, “He is an old man, kind of like a fortuneteller, and he is very wise. Perhaps he will be able to help.”

The pearly white moon was sinking below the horizon, and the glowing orange sun spread its bright, unrealistic light across the land as it rose into the sky. “Come on,” Steve prompted. “Follow me, and I will take you to The Oracle’s house.”

He turned and set off toward the sinking moon. Bethany hesitated for a split second, wondering whether she could trust him. Then she padded after him, the sharp blades of grass pricking the soles of her bare feet. They traveled for miles without stopping, through dense jungles and barren deserts, until the sun began to float lower and lower in the sky and the moon and stars came out. Bethany was sweating and panting heavily and the soles of her feet had been sliced open and covered in her blood before Steve pointed out a wooden hut in the middle of a desert. “That’s his house,” he whispered gravely. The peaked roof was outlined sharply against the dark sky, and there was no light inside the mud-splattered windows.

Tentatively, Bethany approached the house and rapped her knuckles on the wooden door as Steve stood awkwardly behind her. “Who’s there?” a deep, gravelly voice grunted sharply from inside.

Bethany exchanged an uncertain glance with Steve before replying, “Please help us. My name is Bethany and I’m with Steve.”

There was a hesitant pause from inside; then the door swung open to reveal a dark, musty room. An old man stood in the doorway. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles and had a long, tangled white beard. Behind his glasses, Bethany could see bright brown eyes glaring warily at them. Like Steve, the old man had a large head shaped like a cube and no hands. He studied Bethany with suspicion for a moment, and then glanced at Steve. Apparently he seemed to know Steve because a flash of recognition briefly lit up his brown eyes. “Hello,” he grunted.

“Um . . . hi,” Bethany said. “Can we come in?”

The old man gave them a distrustful look, but he moved aside to let them pass. Gratefully, Bethany and Steve stepped into the tiny house. "Sit," the old man ordered, and they each sank obediently into an overstuffed armchair.

"Sir, are you The Oracle?" Bethany asked him as the man set a tray of dusty teacups on the table and began pouring each of them tea.

The man nodded silently. "What do you want?" he demanded, shoving a cup toward Bethany.

Bethany raised the cup to her lips and took a sip. The tea was scalding hot, so she quickly set it down and pressed her hands to her burned lips. "I need to get out of this world," she explained.

The Oracle raised his bushy white eyebrows. "You come from another world, don't you? I can tell. You look so . . . round."

"Um . . . thanks, I think," Bethany muttered. She proceeded to inform The Oracle about how she had teleported into this video game world and how desperately she needed to get back.

When she had finished, The Oracle remained silent, peering at her over his spectacles. Bethany shifted uncomfortably in his sharp, brown-eyed stare. Finally, he said, "Yes. A few humans have come to me before with the same problem as you. You come from . . . Earth, don't you?" He uttered the word *Earth* as though it were something foreign, something that his tongue was not used to speaking.

"Yeah, I do," Bethany replied. "But how do I get *back* to Earth?"

"There is a portal," The Oracle whispered. "It is known as the Earth Portal. But it is *very* far away." Bethany and Steve sat in breathless silence, staring at the old man as though they were trying to soak in every bit of his information as they could. "To activate it, you must obtain three pearls. These pearls are located all over the world."

Bethany slumped back in her chair and smoothed her stringy hair back from her face. This task was a lot more difficult than she had first thought. "I don't think I can do it," she confessed, glancing in despair at The Oracle's and Steve's faces. Suddenly she felt hopelessly alone. "It's too hard. I might be stuck here forever." Her voice cracked and tears pushed against her eyelids.

"Nonsense," Steve snapped sharply. "Of course you'll be returning to your world, because *I'm* coming along with you to help."

"You are?" Bethany said gratefully.

"Yes." Steve drained the rest of the tea from his cup and rose to his feet. "Come on, Bethany, we must go now. Thank you, Mr. Oracle," he said, nodding at the old man. "You have been very helpful."

"Wait," The Oracle protested abruptly as Bethany and Steve were about to step outside. "I actually have one of the pearls. Here, take it." In the open, wrinkled palm of his hand, he showed the others a large, misty green sphere. It was about the size of a penny and a swirling mist seemed to float around inside its greenish surface.

Bethany gingerly took it from his hand and slipped it into her bathrobe pocket. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“And take this as well,” The Oracle said, handing her a rolled up piece of parchment. On the crinkled paper there was a map of the entire Minecraft world. Three small red marks indicated where each of the pearls were located: one in The Oracle’s house, one in a lake, and one in a jungle. Bethany shoved the paper deep into her pocket along with the precious pearl and stared at the old man, her hazel eyes brimming with gratitude. “Thank you so much.”

“You are very welcome,” The Oracle whispered. His chocolate-colored eyes had barely visible flecks of gold in them. “Good luck on your journey!” he added as Bethany and Steve stepped out of the house into the frosty dawn air. The sun was creeping over the horizon, splashing orange light across the landscape.

“Okay,” Bethany said, rifling around in her pocket and tugging out the wrinkled map. “What’s our first destination?”

“Well,” Steve pointed out, “let’s go find the pearl in this lake here first, then we can look for the one in the jungle, and lastly, we can head to the Earth Portal.”

They set off in the direction of the lake. Bethany was uncomfortably aware of the unhealed slashes on the soles of her sore, aching feet, which stung with pain at every step. The pale yellow sand crunched beneath her feet and the blazing sun scorched the back of her exposed neck. They traveled for what felt like a million miles before Steve skidded to a halt, throwing up clumps of dusty sand, in front of a large lake. The rippling water glistened unnaturally, sparkling in the blinding sunlight. Bethany glimpsed her reflection in the murky water. Her blonde hair was sticking out in every dimension and her clothes were coated in a fine layer of mud and grime. *Oh well, she thought. As long as I return home safely, I really don’t care about my appearance.*

“This is it?” Steve questioned, glancing uncertainly at her.

Bethany tugged out the map and unrolled it, smoothing out the crinkles with her fingers. “Yes, this is it,” she confirmed. “But the lake is so large. How are we supposed to find one tiny pearl in there?”

Steve stared at her as though searching for an answer to reassure her, but he seemed lost for words. “I don’t know, Bethany.”

The flickering flame of hope in her stomach was suddenly snuffed out. “Well, we have to try,” she managed. “Do you think we jump in the water?”

“I guess so. On the count of three . . . ready? One . . . two . . . *three!*” Steve roared, and he flung himself into the water. Bethany stared after him at the place where he had sank beneath the surface, inhaled a deep breath, and plunged in after him. The water was icy cold, but it was refreshing against her burning skin. Bethany paddled around blindly for a moment before someone seized her shoulders. She twisted around—it was Steve. His dark, sopping hair was plastered against his forehead. Gasping for air, Bethany floated in place and gurgled, “You doing alright?”

“Yeah,” he panted. “Come on, let’s go look around in the water.”

Bethany nodded, and they dunked their heads under the surface. The water was a murky dark blue, and it was almost impossible for Bethany to see more than a few feet ahead of her. But apparently Steve sighted something, because he grabbed her hand and tugged on it. Bethany followed his pointing finger and realized he was gesturing to a small trapdoor at the bottom of the lake. Bethany darted towards it, closely followed by Steve. But the lake was deep, and as Bethany sank lower and lower in the water, the pressure became almost unbearable. She tried to moan in pain, but a large bubble just erupted from her mouth. She thrashed out wildly with her limbs and opened her mouth to scream. Foul-tasting water flooded her mouth, forcing its way down her throat. Her lungs were shrieking for air. Blackness clouded her vision . . . *what an awful way to die!* she thought, barely conscious. *Drowning in a video game . . .*

Someone was clutching her hand, tugging her deeper and deeper into the water. *What are you doing?* Bethany screamed in her mind. It felt as though something was crushing her, pressing down on her body as if a car had driven over her . . . the pressure was so painful. She attempted to lash out and kick the person who has pulling her down, but she was so weak. Any moment now, she would slip into unconsciousness and never wake up again . . .

Suddenly, the crushing pressure was gone, and so was the choking water that had clogged her mouth and throat. Bethany gasped for air, and beautiful, wonderful oxygen filled her lungs. Her eyes were still clouded, but the blackness was gradually seeping away, clearing her vision. Someone was shouting her name. "*Bethany!* Oh, no, *please* don't be dead! *Bethany!* *Bethany!* *Bethany!*"

She longed to tell the person that she was okay, she was alive, she had survived, but all her strength had been drained from her body. She felt wet hands on her chest, listening for her heartbeat. There was cry of joy when the person realized she was breathing. Bethany lay on the cold, hard ground, gasping for air which had been deprived from her for far too long. Finally, when her vision cleared, she saw Steve's blurry face staring down at her. "Steve," she panted. "Steve, I'm okay!" She dragged her body into a sitting position.

"Oh, thank God!" Steve said. "You were drowning—thrashing all over the place . . . I thought you were dead . . . the pressure and the oxygen deprivation—I should have known humans aren't capable of surviving such deep lakes . . . I'm so sorry . . . I had to drag you down through the trapdoor—"

"Steve," Bethany broke in. "You just saved my life. Why are you sorry?" It was difficult to tell with her fuzzy vision, but she thought she saw Steve's pale face glow scarlet with embarrassment.

"Well, I—"

"It doesn't matter. We're here now. We made it." Smoothing her sopping blonde hair away from her face, Bethany wiped away the water droplets clinging to her eyelashes and scrambled to her feet. Her pajamas and bathrobe were saturated with the lake water and seemed a lot heavier than usual. Bethany scanned her surroundings, an expression of astonishment plastered onto her face. "Steve," she whispered, "where *are* we?"

"I have no idea."

They were in an enormous underground room. The stone floor was frosty cold against Bethany's bare feet. Flaming torches on the slimy walls provided a dim glow that illuminated the room, casting flickering shadows onto the high, arched ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a stone pillar. And on top of the stone pillar there was—

“The second pearl!” Bethany said triumphantly.

“What? Where?” Steve's head twisted to stare around the room. “Oh, I see it! It's up there on that pillar!”

All her exhaustion forgotten, Bethany scrambled forward eagerly, her hands poised to snatch the pearl from the pillar, but when she was one step away, Steve grabbed the hood of her bathrobe and roughly pulled her back. “What are you doing?” Bethany snapped, struggling and trying vainly to free her hood from Steve's grasp.

“Stop!” Steve roared. “You think it's going to be that easy? This whole place is obviously—”

There was a sharp ripping sound and the hood tore off from the rest of the bathrobe. Freed, Bethany rushed forward and made a desperate grab for the pearl—

Suddenly there was a noise like a hundred bombs exploding at once and Bethany was flung backward, high into the air, as if she were a rag doll. A blinding flash of white and a burst of searing heat ripped through the room. Bethany screamed as she was hurled against the rock-hard wall and crumpled against the floor. All the wind seemed to have been knocked from her lungs and she was left gasping for air.

“—rigged with traps . . .” Steve finished meekly.

Bethany's head felt as though it had been split in two. She sprawled on the floor with her eyes squeezed shut, fire tearing through her body. She felt too painful to think, to move, to shed a single tear. All she could do was clutch her head and think about the excruciating pain that was overtaking her. She felt like she was sinking beneath an ocean, slipping into a pool of unconsciousness, until, finally, her world turned black.

When she came to, the sharp sunlight was glaring into her eyes. She was sprawled on the desert ground. Her once-fuzzy clothes had dried into a matted piece of cloth, and her golden hair was like tentacles sticking out of her head.

“Thank goodness you're okay,” Steve muttered gratefully when he saw she was awake. “I had to drag you out of the lake, and I've been waiting for you to regain consciousness.”

“That's the *second* time I've almost died today,” Bethany realized. “And the second time you've saved me,” she added. “Thanks.”

“Well . . . there's good news, and there's bad news,” Steve confessed. “Good news is I got the pearl. But—the bad news is . . . your head has an enormous bruise on it. I'm afraid there might be some internal damage, but I'm no doctor.”

Panic coursed through Bethany's stomach. She needed to get back home—she couldn't just *die* on her way there. “Is there *any* cure?” she demanded desperately.

“Yes, there is,” Steve assured her. He rifled through his pockets and tugged out a glass bottle. Gingerly he swished around the glittering pink liquid inside the vial and pressed it into Bethany’s hand.

She flashed him a quizzical glance. “What is this?”

“It’s a healing potion,” he said. “It will cure your injuries—drink it!”

Bethany cast him another uncertain look, but she tugged off the cork on the bottle anyway. Then she pressed the bottle to her lips and sipped the liquid, finishing the bottle in a single gulp. The initial taste was of unnaturally sweet watermelons, but the aftertaste was of overripe berries. The potion flowed down her throat and bubbled in her stomach. Renewed strength seeped back into Bethany’s aching limbs and the pain from the lump of her head receded. Suddenly she felt as though she could run miles and miles without ever stopping.

“How do you feel?” Steve prompted.

“I feel amazing!” Bethany said, rising to her feet.

Steve pressed the smooth pearl into her palm. Bethany jammed it into her pocket and tugged out the crumpled map. “Okay,” she mused. “Let’s look for the last pearl in the . . . jungle.”

Steve nodded and peered over her shoulder at the map. “It looks like we need to head this way.”

Steve padded off in the direction of the jungle, his feet shuffling across the crunchy sand. Bethany scrambled after him, energy pumping through her body. After a while, Bethany glimpsed a flash of bright green leaves and a breeze of humid air. “There’s the jungle,” Steve pointed out.

As she and Steve stepped into the dense area of trees, the slippery leaves brushed against their legs and the tangled undergrowth kept getting caught in Bethany’s trailing bathrobe. After a few moments of wading aimlessly through the jungle, Bethany demanded, “How are we supposed to find a pearl *in this place*?” A patch of brambles caught on her clothes and she tugged it free, leaving a shred of fabric behind on the undergrowth.

“Well, it can’t be much harder than the lake, can it?” Steve said reasonably, slashing through the overhanging branches with his iron sword and clearing a path for them.

“Oh, look!” Bethany gasped. A dark building made entirely of cobblestone loomed out between the trees. It was shrouded in overhanging vines and shadows created by the pattern of the leaves, so it was barely visible among the dense trees. Bethany and Steve trampled through the undergrowth toward the cobblestone building, tripping on tree roots and crushing brambles beneath their feet.

Steve pressed his hands against the cobblestone and nodded. “This has to be it! Come on, let’s go inside.”

Bethany shoved open the rusted iron door and a blast of frosty air slammed into her, tingling refreshingly on her skin. They were in a large room with a single cobblestone pillar in the center of it. On the top of the pillar perched the third pearl. Flaming torches on the walls cast dark, flickering shadows across the room. The floor was a velvety, pitch black.

“Well, this looks easy enough,” Bethany remarked, glancing triumphantly behind her shoulder at Steve. “I’ll just walk over to the pillar—”

She stepped forward and placed one foot on the velvety floor—only there was no floor. The scream was ripped from her mouth as Bethany felt herself falling, falling, falling through thin air. It was another trick, and Bethany had fallen for it—again. The “floor” wasn’t a floor at all—it was an enormous pit.

Someone roughly grabbed one of Bethany’s flailing arms and gripped her wrist tightly. It was Steve. He was crouching on the edge of the pit, clutching Bethany’s arm while the gaping black chasm yawned beneath her dangling body. “I can’t hold on much longer!” he gasped, his face scarlet from the effort of holding on to Bethany.

“Just try to pull me up!” Bethany shrieked. It felt as though her arm were going to be ripped out of its socket any moment now. She felt herself being dragged up with painstaking effort and a strained grunt from Steve as he inched backward to lift her out of the pit. She hung suspended in the air over the chasm for several minutes before Steve managed to drag her up high enough so that she was able to clamber over the edge of the pit. “Oh my God,” Bethany sputtered, collapsing onto the safe, hard ground as she gasped for air. “That was too close.” Using the tattered sleeve of her bathrobe, she smeared away all the sweat glistening on her face.

Steve’s strained, scarlet face glanced behind Bethany’s shoulder and suddenly turned a sickening shade of white. “It’s not over yet,” he whispered.

Bethany whipped around just in time to see a black mass streaking toward them. In the dim light of the torches, the glow was enough to illuminate the mass’s enormous feathery wings that stretched out at least six feet on both sides and its sharp, glowing eyes. The word *dragon* had barely enough time to pop into her mind before the creature was upon them.

In a confused flurry of soft black wings and shreds of clothes, Bethany and Steve shrieked and frantically attempted to open the door—to no avail. They were locked inside. A sharp claw scored across Bethany’s forehead, ripping her flesh, and blood spilled out, splattering her bathrobe with scarlet droplets. The dragon seized Steve around the waist with its claws and lifted him up into the air. “Steve!” Bethany screamed through the continuous stream of blood pulsing from her forehead, but he and the dragon dangled just out of reach.

“It’s okay, Bethany!” he bellowed. “Just grab the pearl and go!”

“No!” Bethany protested, and she flung herself into the air, landing squarely on the dragon’s thick, scaly neck. The dragon roared in bewilderment, and Bethany used this brief moment of hesitation to wrench Steve free from the dragon’s claws. They scrambled up onto the dragon’s back and clung onto its hard scales as it thrashed around furiously, attempting to throw them off its back. Bethany stretched her fingertips toward the pillar in the center of the room and snatched the pearl off it. Jamming it into her pocket, she demanded, “Steve, give me your sword!”

He flung her his iron sword. Gripping the leather hilt of the sword in her right hand, Bethany clung on to the dragon’s scales with her left hand and stabbed the sword into the dragon’s back. Blood spurted out of the wound and Bethany wrenched out the sword, stabbing it

into the dragon's head and leaving a gaping puncture wound in its scales. The dragon roared with pain and, having no more strength to fly, began to plunge down, down, down into the pit, with Steve and Bethany still on its back.

"*Jump!*" Bethany shrieked, and grabbing Steve's hand, flung her body forward. They whirled through the air for a moment before collapsing safely on the ground at the edge of the pit. Far below, Bethany could hear the dragon's defiant roar as it tumbled through the air to its death.

"You okay?" Steve gasped, his face glistening with beads of sweat that trickled down his nose.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Bethany lied unconvincingly. Crimson blood pulsed from the scratch wound across her blood-smeared forehead and dripped steadily into her eyes. She brushed away several red droplets clinging to her eyelashes with her sleeve and offered Steve a weak smile.

He glanced uncertainly up at the shredded flesh on Bethany's forehead and grinned back in return. "Yeah, right," he muttered. "You're not fine at all." He rifled through his pockets and tugged out another glass bottle filled with glistening pink liquid. "Drink up," he said, offering it to Bethany. "It's another healing potion—my last one."

Bethany obediently raised the bottle to her lips and gulped down the pink liquid. The blood pulsing from her forehead subsided and the wound healed over with fresh new skin. Renewed strength tingled in her body like electricity.

"How about you?" Bethany said, staring at Steve's battered body and his ripped clothes with concern. There were several wounds on his waist where the dragon claws had seized him and slashed his flesh. Splatters of blood reddened his clothes.

"Oh, this is nothing," Steve assured her. "Come on, we'd better get going to the Earth Portal." He fished out his pickaxe and wrenched the iron door open. Bethany followed him as they stepped out into the night. The sun had long since floated below the horizon and a carpet of glittering stars stretched above them. The moon dangled suspended in the sky as if it were held up by a thread, and its pearly white light cast dark shadows across the forest. "There might be monsters out here," Steve reminded.

Bethany hefted the iron sword in her right hand and gripped the leather hilt tightly. "Not a problem." She tugged out the wrinkled map and muttered, "So the Earth Portal seems to be in this direction. Let's go."

Slashing their way through the undergrowth and the overhanging vines, Bethany and Steve headed in the direction of the Earth Portal. Once or twice, a skeleton emerged from the shadows and began pelting them with arrows, but Bethany whacked at it with her sword and it shrank back into the trees. After a while of trampling through the tangled undergrowth and tripping on jutting roots, they emerged out of the jungle into a plain.

Scoring the point of her sword across a zombie's chest, Bethany glanced around at the sloping hills. There were several spotted brown cows ripping out chunks of grass from the ground to eat, a few wandering monsters . . . Bethany's glittering hazel eyes strayed to a small building perched on the top of a hill. She grabbed Steve's arm and tugged. "Look!"

His glowing blue eyes flashed with excitement and he sprinted forward eagerly. Bethany pounded after him, hope and relief bubbling up inside her. She was finally going to return home. It was all over now. Her feet were splattered with blood and had several bleeding gashes on the soles from her hike through the jungle, but she ignored the stabs of pain that pulsed through her body at each step. That didn't matter now. Bethany sprinted past the monsters, slashing heedlessly at them with her sword, with only one thought on her mind: *home*. Not this frightening, blocky world with its unrealistic sun and strange creatures, but her real home on Earth. She clambered up the hill, right behind Steve, her bathrobe brushing against the grass, a laugh of joy escaping her lips. The Earth Portal was so close . . . thirty feet away . . . twenty feet . . . ten feet . . .

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Bethany spotted a flash of green. A soft hissing noise whispered through the silent night. Too late, she realized that it was a creeper. She screamed Steve's name, and he whipped around in bewilderment. Bethany glimpsed a flash of disbelieving realization in his blue eyes before the creeper exploded. The deafening boom ripped through the night, and Bethany was flung backward through the air, landing unceremoniously on her stomach in the prickly grass. Her vision faded in and out of murky blackness, but she dragged herself unsteadily to her feet and sprinted forward. Steve's body sprawled across the grass, loosely gripping his pickaxe in one hand.

"Steve?" Bethany whispered, collapsing onto her knees next to him. She pressed her hands against his chest, listening for his heartbeat, but she found only silence. Cold, foreboding silence. No breath escaped his lips, no twitch of movement in his limbs—his body was lifeless.

"Steve?" she breathed again, unable to keep the pleading note out of her voice. His blue eyes, which had been glittering with persistent determination and life only moments before, were dull and blank. Bethany repeated his name again, then hundred more times, but Steve never answered her. Despair ripped through her heart as though someone were scoring a dagger again and again across her chest. Steve had risked everything to help Bethany return home—even his own life. Tears trickled down her nose and splashed onto his face.

Bethany dragged herself to her feet and rifled through Steve's backpack until her fingers grasped an iron shovel. Tugging it out, she jammed the spade into the soft ground and removed a clump of dirt. She brushed her sleeve across her face to remove the clinging grime and sweat, and continued digging through her sobs and tears. The sun floated up above the horizon and scorched the back of her exposed neck, but she didn't stop. Painful blisters formed on the palms of her hands and her muscles screamed in protest, but she kept digging . . . and digging . . . and digging. . . .

At last she flung the shovel down onto the dirt and scrubbed the sweat from her face and hair. Her hands were raw, red, and covered in scarlet blood that dripped to the grass in a steady flow. She had created a three-foot-deep, six-foot-long hole in the ground. Bethany gently hefted Steve's body off the ground and placed it inside the hole. Then she grabbed the shovel and scooped the dirt she had extracted back into the hole. A fresh wave of tears welled up in her eyes as the dirt covered Steve's lifeless body, but she blinked them away sharply.

When she was done, Bethany stared dismally at the uneven mound of freshly unearthed dirt and sighed softly. "I'm sorry, Steve," she whispered. Her voice sounded hoarse in the moonlit, silvery night. She stood there for a moment, tears that she couldn't hold back streaking her face, before she turned and trudged towards the small building perched on the top of the hill. Her bare, scarred feet rustled across the prickly grass.

Pressing her hands against the wooden door, she shoved hard and it swung open with a protesting creak. The room was small and cramped, but in the middle of it there was a frame of obsidian in the floor. The space inside the obsidian frame was black, and Bethany didn't dare peer inside for fear she would fall in. In the corner of the room there was a rusted machine with three round slots, almost like the slots in an arcade where you would drop coins in to play a video game. She removed the three smooth pearls from her bathrobe pocket and jammed them into the slots.

For a brief moment, nothing happened. Then a searing heat scorched the back of Bethany's neck and she whirled around. The center of the portal was glowing with a swirling, glittering purple mist. Bethany stared at it in fascination, disbelief flashing in her hazel eyes. She stepped onto the obsidian, her bare feet touching the cold, dark rock, and took a deep breath. Was the portal really going to work? Well, there was no turning back now. She had come all this way, and she wasn't going to stop here. Pressing her eyelids shut, she counted to three and flung her body forward, plunging into the portal.

It felt as though she were falling. She tumbled through thin air, her tattered bathrobe whirling around her and her limbs thrashing furiously. Daring to open her eyes a tiny slit, she saw that she was surrounded by a swirling purple vortex that pressed against her body with crushing force. Her stomach curdled, and she wondered desperately how much longer this was going to take.

Thud. The ground slammed into her, the smooth wooden floorboards pressing uncomfortably into her side. Bewildered, Bethany brushed back her tangled mass of blonde curls with her fingers and dared to glance around. Tears of joy welled up in her hazel eyes when she realized that she was back in her familiar, cluttered room. She was home at last. Silvery moonlight dappled the floor, spilling through her window. Bethany rose to her bare feet and plodded silently toward her computer next to her rumpled bed. The screen was full of static and the computer had crashed. Bethany reached out and touched the monitor with one grubby finger. Tears trickled down her cheeks, but at the same time she smiled. It was difficult to describe the emotions whizzing through her mind: relief, sadness, regret. . . . Bethany stared at the crashed monitor for a few moments. Just as she was about to turn away, something familiar flashed across the screen for a split-second. Perhaps it was just Bethany's imagination, but she thought she saw Steve's grinning face on her screen. The image only lasted for a heartbeat, but Bethany was almost certain that it was Steve.

Her heart clenched with pain . . . if only she could have saved Steve, she would be truly happy . . . if only she could have warned him about the creeper earlier . . . if only, if only . . .

Bethany clambered into her bed and tugged the comforter up to her ears over her aching, battered body. Within seconds she drifted into a restless sleep. Her dreams were blurry and confused, but each one always contained flashes of Steve's face and creepers.

Too soon, somebody was roughly shaking her shoulders and ordering her to get up. Bethany stared up at her mother's face through half-closed eyelids. "What?" she muttered, turning away from her mother and wrapping her comforter more tightly around her body.

"It's time to get up, Beth!" her mother said sharply. "You'll be late for school; hurry! You don't want to miss the bus again."

Bethany pressed her knuckles into her eye sockets and rubbed them vigorously. Reluctantly, she threw off her comforter and stretched through her yawn. Her mother uttered a gasp of horror and stared at her daughter with such disgust that Bethany might have grown a second head. "Beth!" her mother cried. "What is wrong with your clothes?"

Bethany glanced down and looked sheepishly at the splatters of hardened blood, grime, and dirt covering her pajamas. "Um . . ."

Her mother pressed her fingers to her mouth to suppress a shriek of surprise. "And what is that enormous scar across your forehead?" she demanded.

"Mom, really," Bethany reasoned. "I'm okay, I promise! I'm fine. This is nothing. No, seriously, it's nothing!"

"Beth," her mother whispered, "have you *been* somewhere during the night?"

"What—? Uh, *no* . . ." Bethany stammered unconvincingly.

"Are you *sure*? Absolutely sure?"

"Yeah . . ." Bethany reassured her mother.

"Bethany," her mother pleaded. "Is there *anything* you want to tell me? Anything at all?"

Bethany's mind flashed back to her strange journey: meeting the friendly Steve, visiting The Oracle, almost drowning in the water, being blown up by a trap, defeating the dragon, watching Steve die, and plunging into the portal. She raised her glittering hazel eyes to meet her mother's glowing brown ones. "No, Mom," she said steadily. "Nothing at all."