

Indeed, Uncle Rick's book did keep me well entertained. I hardly put it down all day, even when our relatives showed up for the celebration. My mother kept telling me to socialize, and I kept telling her that the only guy closest to my own age of seventeen was twelve-year-old Timothy, and the only others who actually *were* my age were a group of girls over in the corner talking about makeup or something. Finally, Uncle Rick stepped in and explained the functioning of an introverted, teenaged boy, at which point my mother conceded and allowed me to return to reading.

And I continued to read for the next three days; upon its completion, the novel left me with a giddy feeling, but also a longing for more fantastical adventures. Coincidentally, I ended up finishing in the same hour my parents announced that they were leaving for their business conference—this conference was half the reason we had decided to make an extended trip out of the holiday; my parents would continue further south to Atlanta, while my sister and I would remain in the care of our uncle.

Before leaving, my mom gave us a few reminders. "Alexa, remember to brush your hair. And floss your teeth, please; I'd rather not pay for any more crowns or fillings. And Jason," she said, turning to me, "I have absolutely no problems with you reading for the rest of the week, but don't forget to stretch your legs every now and then, okay?"

"Okay, mom," I chuckled, humoring her. "I'll see if I remember to."

She opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by my dad. "You about ready to go, Sweetie?" he called as he exited the guest room. "Because we should have left twenty minutes ago." He grabbed one of my mom's bags off the table and made his way to the door.

Turning to us one last time, my mom spread her arms out. "Hugs." Alexa jumped into her embrace, and I wrapped an arm around her in simple side hug.

Straightening up, she took her remaining parcels and met my dad at the threshold.

"We should be back in a week or so," he said. "And thanks again, Rick; this is a huge blessing."

"No problem at all," my uncle replied. "Happy to help!"

And with that, my parents were out the door. I heard the car start outside and watched through the window as they drove out along the dirt path and disappeared into the forest.

Looking to the side, I noticed my sister had a bit of a pout on her face—already, it seemed that she was beginning to miss her parents. Seeing as I was (normally) a gentle, caring brother, I began brainstorming ways of cheering her up. Uncle Rick beat me to it, however.

"Hey, Alexa; got any favorite movies?" he asked her.

Her eyes lit up, suddenly distracted from her melancholy. "Oh! Uhhh... *The Little Mermaid*, *The Princess Bride*, aaaaaand... right, *Zootopia*!"

"Oh, that's a lot of favorites. I think I have a few of those," my uncle said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "You wanna' watch something?"

"Yeah!" Alexa exclaimed eagerly.

“Well, let’s go!” he replied with just as much enthusiasm, jogging off into his living room with my sister close behind. I chuckled, amused, then stepped into the kitchen and set about making toast; not that it was breakfast time or anything—it was 6:20 in the evening, as a matter of fact—I just really liked toast.

By the time I had butter and honey lathered on each slice, I could hear some retro-sounding ballpark music coming from the television. “*Smart kid.*” I thought, smiling. I crunched down on my snack, and was just about to join them for the movie when Uncle Rick showed up in the kitchen doorway.

“So, you liked the book?” he asked me.

I nodded silently, still chewing.

He motioned over his shoulder. “Come on; I want to show you something.”

Curious, I followed him out of the room, munching on my toast as I went. Leading me down the hall, we ended up in his bedroom. He then leapt into the air, much to my surprise, and grabbed a small ring that was hanging from the ceiling. Dragging it down behind him, a trapdoor opened out of the ceiling and a ladder fell from it. Walking around to the front of this ladder, my uncle began his ascent, beckoning me up after him. Holding my plate in one hand, I used the other to assist me in my climb.

The attic was unexpectedly clean—there was no more dust than would be found in any other room of the house, and the air wasn’t nearly as thick and stuffy as I had expected. I took another bite, gazing around at the bookshelves that lined the walls; each shelf matched the slant of the roof, so there was a secondary bar crossing in front of the books in order to hold them in place. In a few locations, the shelves were split apart and separated to allow for windows and dormers. On one side, two small, arched windows allowed me to see out to the driveway, and on the opposite end, a large circular window overlooked the valley below us. In the middle of the floor, a sizeable crocheted rug helped to fill any empty space, and nestled against the wall across from us were a single desk and reading lamp, with a few more books scattered on and around them.

“I figure you’ll find this place useful, seeing as you’ve got a week-long stay ahead of you,” Uncle Rick said, recapturing my attention. “You’re welcome to read any of the books in this room, but please be careful; I’ve managed to get a few first editions on these shelves, and I’d rather them stay in good condition.”

I looked around, chewing slowly in awe. “Did you write any of these?” I asked after swallowing.

“A couple of the ones over on the desk there, yes, but I wouldn’t bother looking too hard; there are far better works in this room by far better authors.”

I didn’t doubt my uncle, but I still wandered over to the table to see if I could spot any of his other books. Before I could even begin searching, however, my eyes were captured by a large

leather-bound tome in the center of the desk. Though worn and cracked, I could still make out the book's faded title, which read "Derya" in some stylized calligraphy.

"What's this one?" I asked, setting my empty plate aside.

Uncle Rick looked over my shoulder, then smiled. "Ah, that's a great book; it can really take you on a journey."

"What's it about?" I asked curiously.

"Read it and find out. I feel it's much better to experience it yourself than to have me explain it for you."

"Okay..." I mumbled, opening the cover.

My uncle made his way back to the ladder, chuckling. "Just be extra careful with it, okay? I know I already said as much, but that book in particular is special." And with that, he descended from the attic before I could ask what he meant—not that I was going to ask, really; I was actually a bit distracted by my examination of the first few faded pages.

There was some sort of author's note at the beginning, much like the ones that say "*To my children,*" or something of that nature. This one was not directed to any certain person, however; it read:

*To chronical the
notable events of
our land.*

"*Interesting...*" I thought. Turning a page, I expected to find a preview of the chapters that were held within the book, and was therefore mildly surprised to see a listing of numbers on the left and vague names on the right. Granted, it was set up much like a chapter listing, just not the type I was used to; for example, the top row read "103-134" on the left, and "The Advancement of Magic" on the right. After studying the list for a bit, I put two and two together, finally realizing that the numbers were probably a listing of dates, not page or chapter numbers. "Some history book," I chuckled drily. "Too bad it's fictional."

Now, I have a certain way of examining books before I read them—I'll start by going over any information provided at the front, as I just did, then I tend to skip all the way to the back to see anything the author placed there, such as a summary, the inspiration for the work, any special maps, and so on and so forth.

For *Derya*, there was indeed a map in the back, which depicted a sprawling continent with a large, crescent-shaped sea in the middle of it; in a few places along the southern edges of this sea, I picked out tendrils of land that crept out into the waters. It was certainly an interesting way for things to be shaped, but interesting was good. As if that wasn't enough, detailed and easy to understand depictions covered it, clearly showing where forests resided, where mountains slumbered, where plains rolled, and where desert sands shifted; here and

there, towns of various sizes and names were shown to populate the land, with their individual sizes being revealed by a map key along the page's edge.

Turning back a page, there was a stark contrast between the detailed map on the previous page and the simple blankness that was on this one. *"Oh, so this one of those books with a load of blank pages at the back,"* I thought. Curious, I turned through a few more, finally finding some text on a left-hand page; this too was printed with a bit of flare, though not quite as fancy as the title.

My examination complete, I grabbed a chunk of pages and was about to return to the beginning, but was stopped by a shocking sight—words began forming on the right-hand page, all on their own, the ink materializing and spreading across the surface of the faded paper. As I stared mind-blown at this phenomenon, the writing stopped, though it was a while before my brain put itself back together and allowed me to read the words.

Unless I am mistaken, you seem to be the brave, adventurous type, correct?

I continued to clutch the pages in silence, unsure of whether I should respond or not.

Are you mute as well? Or have you yet to learn the basics of reading?

This stirred me into replying, as I wasn't about to be insulted by a book. "No, I'm just a bit cautious around sentient office supplies."

That is understandable, though you still have not answered the first question presented.

"Well," I said, thinking, "I like exploring new places; and I suppose I could be brave, depending on the way the word's defined..."

Excellent! We could use somebody of your type. Are you ready?

"Wait, ready for what?" I asked.

Apparently, the book was asking if I was ready to be thrown into crushing blackness, which I most certainly was not ready for. The darkness formed around me, quickly replacing Uncle Rick's attic and muting every sound I had been hearing; for a moment, there was almost a complete absence of mental stimuli—I couldn't see anything, hear anything, smell anything; heck, I couldn't even taste anything. And I felt nothing as well, aside from the rapidly increasing beat of my own heart. Soon enough, though, this was joined by a pressing sensation from all sides. As though I weren't terrified enough, the pressure continued to increase, causing my panic to follow suit. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came forth. *"I am going to die!"* I thought; and the worst part was that I could do nothing about it. The darkness continued to squeeze me, to the point where it felt as though my lungs would collapse, to the point where my bones felt close to breaking, and to the point where I began to lose consciousness, succumbing to the deadly embrace of the black void.