

I lurched into consciousness, bolting upright and gasping as though I had surfaced from the bottom of a deep, dark pool; my eyes were wide and terrified, though it took a bit before I remembered what I was terrified of. Recalling how the Plague of Darkness had paid me a special visit, I gazed around fervently, worried by the blackness that still seemed to surround me.

An upwards glance put my fears to rest. Above me were the silhouettes of treetops, framed by the light of the stars and moon. Though this begged the question: how the heck did I end up in a forest? My mind came up with many possibilities, each more elaborate than the last—from sleepwalking to kidnapping, even teleportation. I knew a lot of them sounded silly, or even downright improbable, but my mind tends to jump to extremes when encountering the unfamiliar.

Regardless, I figured that trying to understand how I got to where I was shouldn't yet be my top priority—finding my way out was more important. I peered about a second time, trying to spot any lights that might be shining through the tree trunks; perhaps Uncle Rick's cabin was close by. After a short search, albeit a nervous one too, I just barely managed to spot some light in the distance. It wasn't the warm, golden glow that might come from a lightbulb or a fire; rather, it was cold and blue—perhaps a clearing where the light of the moon shown through. One way or another, it was better than the dark undergrowth I currently sat in.

I put my hands down to stand up; one hand went down on a moist layer of leaves, the other pressed into something stiff, causing the object to snap and pop lightly. I was puzzled for a moment, but then realized I still had the book, a handful of pages remaining clutched in my hand. *"Well, the self-writing book definitely wasn't a dream..."* I thought. *"Unless this is a really elaborate one... Or maybe there was something in my toast."*

Shaking my head, I closed up the book and rose to my feet. My legs felt unsteady, causing me to stumble around like a drunk. In time, I found my balance (enough of it, at least) and began making my way towards the clearing. I quickly found that it was tremendously uncomfortable to walk with my heels, and ended up tiptoeing my way along, which just made me even more likely to stumble and fall on my unsteady legs—this happened on several occasions. Whenever I wasn't falling, I was getting half the forest stuck between my toes or jabbed into my feet, which must have lost their shoes on the way out here. My head didn't escape unscathed either, often brushing against or plowed into low-hanging branches; every now and then, my face would escape and the foliage would only grab at my ears. A couple times, I felt a tug at the base of my spine, like something was catching in the dense brush and pulling at me, but for my life I couldn't think of what.

All the same, I eventually stumbled my way out into the clearing, which housed a small dirt path that cut through the forest to either side of me; from what the moonlight revealed, the trees around me varied in size, from stubby oaks with broad reaches to soaring spruces that

scrapped the sky. The hoots of owls and the calls of other nocturnal creatures could be heard throughout the woods, echoing in the still air.

The walk to this location had been exceedingly difficult; granted, I had been working my way through unlit and unfamiliar territory, but I would not have expected it to be so tedious and painful. I stood still and took a deep breath, then became curious as to whether my heels felt better by now. I lowered them to the ground, shot back up to my toes at the resulting pang of discomfort, lost my balance again, and fell to my rear—no, they did not feel any better.

As I sat there in the faint light of the clearing, I noticed something for the first time: my legs were bent at an odd angle—like, a really, *really* odd angle; both my lower legs seemed to have been broken backwards. Even while I gazed in disgusted horror at this, I marveled at my ability to walk through the thick undergrowth of an unfamiliar forest in such a state. ...But that shouldn't have been physically possible, for split bones would have collapsed under my weight, not to mention the unbearable pain I would have felt since waking up. Tentatively, I moved a leg, bending everything south of my waist. It all moved, smoothly and without a single hint of being broken.

The more I moved the limb, the more I began to realize that what I had initially thought were breaks in my bones were actually my ankles, which had somehow been moved upwards on my legs. My heels, now a great distance from toes, were much bonier, which explained the pain I felt when trying to stand on them. Naturally, I found these observations to be highly unsettling and terrifying.

My thoughts wandered back to my late-night stroll through the undergrowth, and all the strange things I felt as I went along my way. Tentatively and exploratively, I felt my way up along the sides of my head. Encountering nothing on the side of my skull, where my ears should have been, I worked further up to discover unusual protrusions; sure enough, my head was filled with noise as I fingered these objects—the type of noise that I only ever heard when fingering my own ears.

As panic welled up in me for the second time that evening, I pushed myself to my misshapen feet, ran forwards a short way, fell, got up again, and finished dashing to the middle of the clearing, where the moonlight was brightest. I looked down at my nose, which was now black and placed further away from my face than it should have been, resting on the end short muzzle. Running my tongue around the inside of this unnatural face protrusion, I felt many more canines than the four I was used too. Whipping a hand around to my back, I found what had been tugging at me on my way to the clearing: a large tail attached just above my rear; granted, it was a nice, fluffy tail, but it was a *tail*! I wasn't supposed to have a tail!

With adequate lighting, I could now see that my body was covered in fur, although there wasn't enough light to see what color it was—not that I cared all that much; I didn't want the fur there at all, nor any of these alterations. Said alterations also left their mark on my hands, which were no longer actual hands; I now had four slightly stubbier fingers on each, and though

retaining my thumbs (which I suppose I should be grateful for), my nails were gone completely, and I now had a set of dark paw pads. The same went for my feet, though they didn't have any thumbs (which I should also be grateful for, considering how much everything else changed).

I was also naked, though I suppose that was counteracted by the fur that covered me.

At that point, I came to understand the full meaning behind the phrase "my head is spinning." With all this internal dizziness, I dropped to the ground, grateful to do so for once that evening. Resting an arm on a deformed leg, and resting my head in a paw-hand-thing, I wished dearly that this whole thing would turn out to be a dream. Reaching across to my shoulder, I pinched it, hard, yet remained in the forest. Just to be sure, I stretched out a paw, lifted my head, braced myself, and then let loose a solid smack across my own face. All I managed to do was knock myself into the grass and get a headache.

I didn't get up. I didn't want to. Instead, I lay silently, trying to figure out how and why all this happened, and struggling to either accept or deny the reality of this phenomenon. I looked at the book, still clutched in my hand, then opened it up to the back pages; though hard to make out in the dim light, the words it had written to me were still there.

"Well?" I asked shakily. "Did you do this?"

Nothing happened.

I swallowed and took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. "Why?" I whispered.

Still no response.

"Could you at least tell me where I am?" I pleaded, raising my voice in desperation.

The pages remained unchanged.

I sighed. *"I'm talking to a book... Don't lose it yet, Jason; come on."*

Just then, I felt a warmth growing against my hand. Folding the book closed, I turned it and looked at the cover to find that its title, "Derya," was emanating a faint white glow.

I groaned in defeat, dropping my head back to the grass. Despite the confused, despairing muddle of feelings I now had, I didn't see the harm in asking one last question. "Can I go home now?"

A quick look at the final pages yielded no reply, and the glow from the book's cover soon faded. Its message, however, remained clear: I wasn't going to be finding Uncle Rick's cabin any time soon.