

# CHAPTER 1

Nub flipped the checker in his palm, then pocketed it, rubbing his stump over sweaty black curls, watching the patchwork sail in the distance.

Through bendy kelp blades, a bubble of dust hung, sticky, around two ships before eventually smoothing out to blend into the solid Booms rock. The whole picture made it seem the ships were sinking. Swallowed up by the oily mud, soon to be gone forever. And it was just about true, anyways. Patch had tipped.

*Welp.*

There wouldn't ever be a better time to leave than now. Never. They were loading the smaller shelter up with people, mostly hurt. Carrying tents and other useful things, getting ready to take 'em all to some nearby pantry. Too much was going on for anyone to spend much time caring about where Nub had gone. Not that they would, anyway. It was the Booms. People came and went and then came again, before, well, you know.

But still, he tried not to think too much about the gang. They wouldn't never act like they'd miss him, but he knew they would. A bit. Small, funny, Nub, with his nub arm, crushed many years ago on a dare to see who'd put a finger under Patch's big magnets. He put his whole hand in because no one would ever outdo him. It made a lot of sense at the time, though it wasn't his best moment, truth be told. But there was always something good to take from bad, always. After all that, they all knew not to test him. He wasn't scared of nothing. Proved it every day with that nub. Yeah, they'd miss him a little. If only that they wouldn't have nothing to make fun of, or no one to look up to. And with his nub an all, they'd need him for the next rumble that was coming.

Nub did feel kinda bad about abandoning 'em before all that. Just last week, the Scabs slipped some cave doo under Packet's pillow. Said he woke up with the stuff in his hair, and it

was true enough, though Nub wasn't about to feel it, to be sure. And since they weren't near a river, there was no way he could bathe it out, neither. Packet was convinced he'd never get the smell outta his nose now.

So revenge was coming, and Twig organized like he always did. As far as Nub knew, they'd been planning to spray at least four tents. Five if they could figure out when Peanut's mom ever left hers. Put a little howler piss in it; you'd have glow gnats for weeks. It woulda been a good laugh. If Cricket hadn't died, they'd already have gotten that laugh. Not that he was blaming her for dying an all that. It happened sometimes.

Nub needed to remember none of that mattered too much now. Patch was all sorts a messed up. Tents now on the wall like pointy pictures. Rumbles were gunna become things to remember, instead of needing to be planned. Didn't have to be a genius to figure that one. Yeah, it all seemed like child's play compared with before.

Now, maybe the gang would split up. That would prolly happen. No way they'd all go to the same home. No way. New shelters never liked taking big cliques of Floaters, and kids were especially dangerous to have around, particularly those like Nub, who didn't have parents people wanted either. But new things were cool too. They would miss him a little, but not too much. Not for too long. Not with everything going on. They'd find new friends, someone else to admire; those guys made friends easy, and never ran outta jokes.

*His parents, though?* Nah, they wouldn't miss him, not even a little. Dad prolly wouldn't even know he was gone for a few months at least, and only if someone told him. And that person wouldn't be Mom, neither. Mom had been wanting him gone from the moment he was born. Never really liked him; decided that a bit too late as he was already here. Well, now she'd finally get her wish.

He was going, and if he had the choice, there was no chance he was coming back anytime soon. Nub definitely knew he was gonna find something none of 'em would believe. Maybe

when he was way older, he'd happen upon 'em in passing and gloat a bit. It was somethin' to look forward to, so he supposed he would.

Nub put his good right hand in his pocket and kept walking, kicking at some loose rocks, tryna avoid getting slapped by the heavy waving kelp blades. His fingers toyed with an object kept safe in his pocket. He snuck a look around himself, though there'd be no chance anyone was near, and pulled it back out.

It was a round, plastic checkers piece, whiteish in color, about the size of his two thumbs put together. One side of it was normal, 'cept for tiny writing you had to squint to read. On the other side, though, was a blinker. Or at least that's what Nub decided to call it, 'cause it blinked with its little, bright red light.

*On. Off.*

*On. Off.*

Nub watched it for a while as Patch disappeared into the distance. *On. Off. On. Off.* Yeah, it *was* blinking faster. *Huh.* Nub flicked the checker back over and sidestepped over a clump of mud into a mostly empty area. The kelp blades here had been burned and cleared by lightning and oil. The smell wasn't all that bad neither, like incense. Much better than how the shelter smelled most days. It's last smolder had faded sometime earlier; now, all that was left was oily muck and Nub himself. He angled the checker beneath a ray of sunlight. The scratchings were made with thin black strokes, melting into the piece. It circled perfectly around its edges, then spiraled toward the middle. He read it again.

*A place exists, they know not where.*

*A fairy-tale, both truth and dare.*

*Follow thee, and pay the fare.*

*A future worth you'll discover there.*

And then, in tiny writing, he could hardly make out, directly in the center.

*Keep this piece. Read the note, and remember its contents. I will be watching.*

Nub dug in his pocket for the note, then pulled it out, unfolded it with one hand, using his other nub-hand to press it flat against his palm.

*Nub, for reasons quite obvious to me, you can not have my audience. However, know that I understand your plight. If you wish or have the ambition to be remarkable, regard the light. The beacon flashes faster the closer you are. I surmise that you will recognize something bizarre afar. Travel alone, without company, or somebody else. You will soon understand. The checker will die in two nights; plan wisely.*

*Be brave and discover my secret.*

*—Your Friend, Pseudonym*

Nub sounded out the name in his head, tryna make sense of it. Pss-ood-oni-mmm. Yeah, weird one for sure. Never heard of a fellow who went by anything like that, and there were a buncha odd names out here. He took a resolute step forward, feeling energized. If anything, it only made him feel more sure he was doing the right thing. There was no way anyone normal wrote all of this.

It was alotta big words, but Nub thought he knew well enough what it all meant. Follow the light and find something cool. Pretty much. *Right?* It was kinda like a treasure hunt, ‘cept it wasn’t a game. It was the real thing. Way too smart to be a prank from one of the Scabs. And anyway, too much had happened. Nub wore his shoes all the way down the side of Patch, covered ‘em good in oil, though not ‘cause he wanted to. Took ‘em off for a moment to go find a brush to scrub ‘em off, put the shoe back on, and this was inside. The checker folded into the note.

So, whatever it was, it was new.

No way one of the other kids woulda come up with something like that, now.

So with confidence, Nub repocketed the note and continued through the thick kelp shade, following the blinker. *On. Off.* He watched it like a tasty meal, making sure it only got faster, never slower. *On. Off.* In almost no time, Patch was completely gone from sight. And the kelp forest too. He entered scarred fields of mill stalks, the flowers slowly rising as the oil baked in the sun.

*On. Off.*

He walked farther.

A part of his head definitely thought that maybe all this was something evil. Like, luring a kid out into the middle of nowhere 'cause someone didn't wanna be seen. Nub wasn't stupid. He knew that some people were sick in ways others didn't wanna talk about. Nub knew this could be like that.

The further he went without finding anything, the more he thought about it.

But he never even considered turning back around.

After a time, hand long gone clammy with building nerves despite the day's muggy heat, Nub found a cave. It wasn't just any cave, though. Actually, calling it a cave seemed a little dishonest. It was more like a hole drilled right down into the hill plains, slabs of stone along its mouth broken and offset like crooked teeth. Only old mossy boulders at its rim to stop a guy from taking an evenin' stroll and tumbling down right into the pits of nowhere. The more Nub looked, it kinda reminded him of a hole a dust scallop would make as it set itself into the ground, mouth open wide for any unlucky creature to pass by. But bigger.

Scary big.

Nub looked down at his blinker, which wasn't hardly a blinker anymore. Instead, it was now just one smooth tone of red, like a regular small light, blinking so fast it didn't blink at all. He gulped. This had to be the place.

Nub sidled on up to it, keeping one hand steady on a boulder just to be extra sure he wouldn't fall in. Though not totally full, there was a gathering of oily water from the Ilfaan, enough that Nub could see it pooled a few fathoms straight down. He stood there for a good minute, looking at the blinker, considering if it would be crazy to jump in. Seemed like the right place. Chrome had a book where a hero once had to dive in some water, swim around a bit to find the secret entrance somewhere else. But as the idea bounded around in his head a few times, he was sure it was dumb.

"This can't be the right place..." he said, thoughts coming out of his mouth. "Ain't nothin' here."

"Your assumption is incorrect," came an inhuman, metallic voice from somewhere behind. "This is the right place."

As Nub spun faster than he ever had in his life, his shoe caught in the rocks. His heart leapt. He felt the empty air on his back, his arms waving wildly, trynna find something to catch his balance. His nub-hand was useless, but his good hand found the boulder, his fingers slipping against its slick surface. Then, after an embarrassing moment, huffing, he hugged that same boulder and stared out in the direction he'd heard the voice.

"Hello!" the same strange voice called.

He didn't see anything.

“H-hello...” Nub called back, voice shaking, looking out into the scenery beyond him, hearing only a faint click.

Eventually, he spotted it. It was almost as embarrassing as falling that he didn't notice it before, but then again, it could've been mistaken as a small rock if it weren't for the fact that it floated an arm length off the ground.

“Holy hell, you're a robot!”

The more he looked, the more certain he was. It was a dumpy little robot, cube-shaped, a couple hands in size, covered by red and green moss and algae as if it hadn't moved in years. But it was moving now, just not in a human-like way. It floated like a shelter, maybe with a magnet just the same. Four flexible and thin leg-things moved about as if they were creatures of their own, some crunching as they clamped and unclamped to the ground, the motion scooting it forward. The only part of the robot that wasn't covered in muck was its flat, square eye, which shuttered itself every few seconds with a mechanical click.

“No, I am not a robot; I am a human,” the robot said.

For a real long time, Nub just kinda stood there, debating whether or not he'd snuffled a bit too much dust today. After figuring that he hadn't, and also figuring that the robot didn't seem too dangerous, he said, “Uh, negative.” Nub couldn't help but make a robot voice. “Respectfully, Mr. Robot.”

“I am a human,” the robot said again.

“You sure look funny for a human.”

The blasted robot waved one of his flailing jiggers. “I could say the same about you, fellow human.”

Nub narrowed his eyes. *Damn, that counter stung.* He respected that, even in his shock at happening upon a robot. Even a crazy one.

“How many robots have you seen that could speak?” the robot continued.

“Ah, well. I hardly ever seen any robot that actually works. Any we come across end up in parts. Never a talking one before.”

“So, clearly, I am a human.”

“Also, never seen a human made of metal before.”

“Then I am the first,” the robot moved one arm in a mock bow.

Right, a human. Got it.

“Feels weird not to introduce myself, even if you’re a... *metal human*. The name’s Nub rhymes with stub.” He offered his hand, then thought better of it—the robot’s whirling hands looked a bit dangerous for a proper shake—instead opening his palm to show Human—the robot—his blinker, which no longer blinked. “You know anything about this, Human?”

Human scooted itself forward with its four leg-arm-things and spun one of them to grab the object with a small extendable claw. A latch opened at the top, where a normal human’s head woulda been, but from Nub’s vantage, all he could see inside was an empty space with a few red lights. It kinda made sense. Robots—even those that thought they were human—didn’t need brains in the same place as real people. Or maybe the light was a brain for a robot. Either way, it dropped the chip in, then held two of its limbs out, bent upwards, with its other two limbs crossed, as if it were sitting on air. Almost like it was meditating or something.

“Who is your friend, Nub?” Human asked.



Nub started, looking around himself, thinking someone had actually followed him. But again, he saw no one. “My friends ain’t here. I made sure of it, just like I was told.”

“No, the name of your friend. It is the password. If someone steals the sensor, both are required.”

“Oh!” Nub clumsily fumbled in his pocket for the note and read the name again. “Psss—ood—oni—mmm.”

Human didn’t react for a long moment, as if unclear Nub had finished. “Try again.”

Nub blushed, cleared his throat, and tried a different combination of sounds. *Sometimes P’s were silent, yeah?* He was pretty sure that was true. “Seee—oo—doh—nymmm,” he offered hopefully.

“As a fellow human, I am embarrassed for you.”

“You say it then!”

“This contradicts the purpose of requiring a password.”

“Well, I can’t freakin’ say it!” Nub glared at the robot, “So just reject me or tell me what I wanna know. Why the hell did I come all this way? What’s going on here?”

Human seemed to consider, bringing its two raised limbs back down, then crossed in front of the bulk of its body. Its eye shuttered maybe a little bit more than before, and then it waved Nub forward. “Close enough. You have been approved; now we will initiate.”

*That easy, huh?*

“Awesome,” Nub exclaimed with a tiny spring in his step. So far, all of this was pretty cool, all things considering. See, following the note was always a good idea. Nub had a good sense for stuff like this.

Nub jumped as one of Human’s limbs snaked forward to his shoulders. “This is a complex cave system,” Human said, “But there is lodging for you. However, it is recommended that you spend only one night here, the journey is long, and you will want to find what you are seeking in a timely fashion.” Human paused and pointed, noticing Nub’s confusion. “Go that way. I am in power-saving mode.”

“Power saving mode?”

“Yes,” Human indicated the limb now attached to Nub’s shoulder. “You walk, then I can float and tell you where to go.”

Alright, it was a lazy robot. Maybe he was human after all. Nub was halfway to asking what he was s’posed to be seeking before Human cut him off, continuing monotone.

“You will be provided with an essential pack containing everything you will need for the journey, including a new beacon, which you will follow in the same way and is similarly restricted by time, although you are given more leeway.”

“More time for—”

“Most of the area is barren, and you will unlikely encounter another human like yourself or me. However, a weapon will be provided in the case of predators. It is suggested that you use it sparingly. And you have heard of the Streams, yes?”

“Uh, of course, yeah, I’ve heard of ‘em.”

“Great. When you encounter them, do not try to pass through. That is fatal. There are cave systems similar to these going either direction along the Streams, caves that pass underneath them. You will know when you find them. For now, it is ideal if you rest.”

“But...” Nub forced the words out, expecting to be interrupted again. Then noticing that he wasn't, he continued slowly, “What... What's going on? What am I looking for? Are you coming with me?”

“No, I can not come. My station is here,” Human said, pulling itself around Nub until it was facing him, eye lens flapping. “Nub, have you ever wanted to do something important?”

“Yeah...” Nub breathed.

“Congratulations, the opportunity has arrived. To make a real difference and change your life and the lives of everyone of this land.” Human said this almost reverently, in his robotic way. “You have been recommended to join the Compact.”