

Alex Chambers

Where Light Doesn't Exist

Robert and Jaden were running out of ideas. It had been too long since Georgia had disappeared down the cave and black clouds were quickening overhead.

The cave was unlike any they'd seen or read about as it wasn't made of stone but foliage. Trees sprouted up from the ground then curled and combined with leaves, bushes, and branches to make a completely solid structure, daunting the barely teenage boys standing just outside its mouth. It was lightless inside and no matter how much the two of them called, there was no echo or reply from Georgia. But the strangest of all was that the inside of the structure was significantly larger than the outside. When Robert and Jaden had dared to venture inside earlier, it became clear that they'd walked for much longer than physically possible before turning back.

Robert thought back to earlier this morning, when Georgia had pounded on his door and demanded he come see what she'd found. Jaden was dragged along when the pair chanced upon him on the way into the forest. When they had arrived, Georgia pointed down into the abyss. 'Come on!'

'What is it?' Robert asked, approaching slowly. Jaden said nothing and kept his distance as Georgia grinned and began trotting into the mouth of the cave.

‘I dunno,’ she said. ‘But it goes a long way—I’m gonna see how far.’

She hadn’t said anything more. Before Robert or Jaden could even utter a protest, she’d dashed off. When she didn’t return for a few minutes, the boys tried to follow her, but found that the seemingly straight line surrounded by impossibly close-knit trees wasn’t so simple. As they walked, the path twisted and turned even though they never once changed the direction they travelled. The further they went, the more the light was swallowed by the shadows of the cavern.

Robert, now pacing back and forth at the mouth of the cave nearly an hour later, was starting to mumble to himself. ‘It’s getting late—we need to do something. I can’t believe we couldn’t stop her,’ he groaned. He’d been running his hand through his tan hair so many times now it was no longer neat.

‘Calm down,’ Jaden growled from against a tree nearby. ‘It’s Georgia’s own damn fault. Always running off and doing stupid stuff like this. I wish you hadn’t babbled to her about how ‘interesting’ this ‘strange new phenomenon’ looked either.’

‘Okay, I got a little excited,’ he admitted. ‘But this is like something out of one of my sci-fi books! There could be a whole universe in there—’

‘Please don’t start again.’ Jaden rolled his eyes and began rubbing his forehead. ‘I’m tired. This is the fourth supernatural thing we’ve had to deal with this week.’

The isolated, English countryside town of Edgeville was far from the first place anyone would’ve guessed would be a hotspot for paranormal activity, but for the past couple of months, the town’s children had found themselves embroiled in a series of strange happenings. A decrepit mansion appeared on the outskirts of town one evening and disappeared the next. Pale, ephemeral figures stalked the town’s graveyards. Objects floated and flew across rooms. And the children had had more than enough encounters with fanged, clawed and/or winged creatures that stalked them relentlessly, but always just out of the corner of their sight.

No one over the age of eighteen knew about any of this and most of the older children tried to deny it or explain it rationally. No matter what, any time an adult was called to investigate one of the strange and dangerous incidents it would vanish. Whole haunted houses would disappear. The floating spectres would evaporate just in time for the adult to miss them.

The children of Edgeville no longer slept soundly, but that didn't stop some of them from trying to do something about it or being intrigued.

'Do you think it goes underground?' Robert said. 'That would explain why it goes for so long and why it's so dark inside.'

When he didn't get a response, he turned to see Jaden yawning.

'You're *still* talking science-y mumbo-jumbo,' he said.

'Aren't you interested?' Robert retorted and then he added, 'or worried?'

'No. You don't sound like you're worried either.'

Robert thought for a moment, then said, 'Are we just getting used to this, maybe?'

'Sick of it, more like,' Jaden huffed. 'I mean, how many times has Georgia leapt into some dangerous situation and come out just fine with that stupid grin all over her face? And you're treating it like a big mystery novel that you're trying to figure out.'

'This *is* a big mystery,' Robert said. 'And I do want to figure it out. And if we keep investigating, maybe we'll all figure something out.'

A distant rumble of thunder came from far above. Jaden wrinkled his nose and frowned. 'Go get Veronica. We're not getting anything done right now.'

Most of the town's children tried to ignore or flat-out deny that there was anything wrong, but after the incidents had started, a small band of kids had decided they'd actively explore the terrifying events that plagued their town. Veronica, as the oldest over Jaden by a few months, had been unofficially designated their leader, which meant that when Georgia got herself into trouble, it was usually Veronica who ended up organising the rescue mission.

'Does your phone have reception out here?' Robert asked.

'No.'

'Neither does mine. Stay here then, just in case Georgia comes back out. I'll head into town...'

'Fine by me,' Jaden answered, sitting down at the base of the tree.

There was another, louder bang of thunder. Robert gave a thumbs-up and hurried off out of the forest.

He first swung by his own house, creeping in through the garage door and rifling through his father's things for anything of use. As he'd hoped, he found a rope along with a heavy-duty torch. He wasted no time making a run for Veronica's house a few streets over. He mulled over the thought of gathering up more friends for the rescue, but a flash of lightning accompanied by a dangerously close rumble caused him to decide that he was close to running out of time.

He approached the front door, first tossing the rope and torch into the bushes, and then knocked. Robert figured it'd be best to avoid any suspicious questions. The door was opened by Veronica's father, Curtis, who greeted Robert warmly.

'What can I do for you, Robert?' he asked. 'It's looking to be a heck of a storm. Not really the right time to be off playing in the streets, eh?'

'No sir,' Robert answered. 'I was actually wondering if Veronica was around. I had a, uh, spur of the moment idea. It was looking to be a good night for a movie so I wanted to see if Veronica and some other friends wanted to come over. Is she in?'

'What a great way to spend a Saturday night! She's home—I'll go and get her. Just remember not to put on anything too scary. You know how she hates all those violent horror movies.'

Curtis called his daughter and departed the room. Robert managed to hold the smile on his face until Curtis left before grimacing. Veronica came treading down the stairs and frowned when she saw Robert's expression.

'Let me guess,' she said. 'Georgia?'

Robert nodded. 'She's in trouble.'

'What did she annoy this time?'

'It's a little more complex than that bat thing she upset last week. It might be better to see for yourself. It's in the forest.'

'I'll go get my coat and some good shoes,' she sighed. She hopped back up the stairs and returned a moment later wearing a pair of pink gumboots and a baby-blue raincoat. Veronica was a year older than Robert, but nearly a foot shorter. She wasn't

as smart as Robert and she definitely wasn't as brave or strong as Georgia, but she had a shine in her blue eyes and a posture that was tall and confident. Robert could tell by looking—even if Veronica couldn't see it herself—that she was definitely most suited to be in charge.

'I'll try to explain what's happening on the way,' he said as they departed. He stopped a moment to retrieve his rope and torch from the garden before they jogged towards the forest. A drizzle of rain had begun to shower the pair as they fought through the trees and bushes towards their destination.

'It's over there,' Robert pointed past some trees and over a hill. 'I left Jaden there, in case Georgia came back.'

In between breaths and crashes of thunder, Robert tried to describe what the cave was to Veronica.

'So it's like a cave, but it's bigger on the inside than it looks from the outside,' she panted. 'But it's made of trees?'

'Exactly!' Robert said. 'Think of what could be inside there. I mean, there could be anything really—'

'Is that it?' Veronica interrupted.

The rain had intensified, but there was no mistaking the gnarled shape of the cave a few metres away. As they hastened towards it, a flash of lightning illuminated the area. In the half-light, the cave looked more twisted and unnatural; the branches of the trees sharper and darker, but something else had caught their attention in that brief moment of sudden light.

'Robert,' she breathed. 'Was that...?'

'Yeah, I saw it too.'

Something had jolted like a startled spider into the cave, too fast for either of them to make out what it could be.

'A deer?' Veronica suggested.

'Too big and too quick,' Robert shuddered. 'And...I think it was black. And scaly.'

'I really hope you're wrong. Could it have been—?'

She stopped and they flicked their heads towards each other. Robert switched on the torch and they hurried down the hill towards the cave. He swept the light over the area, scanning for any sign of Jaden. They both began to call his name, hoping he'd just fallen asleep under the tree, but it soon became clear he wasn't answering.

'He probably just went home, right?' Veronica said. Her voice was quivering.

'I told him to wait here, though,' Robert said. 'And I know he's lazy, but he wouldn't go home without Georgia.'

They both turned and looked down the looming maw of the cave. Even now, armed with the torch, Robert couldn't see anything other than the walls of trees on either side of the path deep into the darkness. It seemed to stretch on forever.

'Give me the torch,' Veronica said, holding her hand out. 'And one end of the rope.'

'But—'

'One of us has to stay out here,' she explained. 'And you're right—Jaden wouldn't have gone home without Georgia. If they did go home, we'd have seen them on the way here. So they're in there.'

'I want—'

'I *know*,' she continued. 'I know you want to see what's in there. That's why I'm going in; you might get lost or distracted.'

Robert huffed, but complied. 'If you see anything dangerous...'

'I'm not leaving without them either,' she said. Without another word, she faced the cave, torch in one hand and rope in the other, and began to tread cautiously into the abyss. A ways in, she started to run, calling Jaden and Georgia's names.

Robert watched her get smaller and smaller, the rope in his hand unwinding rapidly as the light from Veronica's torch steadily vanished from view. He was alone in the closing darkness. The sky howled and rain began to pelt him furiously. He stepped into the mouth of the cave, hoping its branches would at least keep him dry as he waited. The rope in his hand continued to unravel.

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The walls of the cave had begun to change. Veronica could see the branches and foliage of the trees melting together to form some new substance that was a dull brown. It looked like it'd be sticky to touch, but she didn't dare test this thought. A smell like decomposing fruit had begun to gradually rise in potency and it took all of Veronica's willpower to avoid turning back. What was worse was that the light from her torch was steadily becoming useless. The blackness of the cave seemed so immense that her light couldn't pierce it. The ray seemed increasingly insignificant as she ventured deeper. Her heart was thundering like the storm she had left so far behind

'Jaden!' she called. 'Georgia!'

She stopped running for a moment to catch her breath and listen for a response. She thought she heard footsteps somewhere ahead, but otherwise the cave was silent.

'Please, please, please be Jaden and Georgia.' she muttered.

Veronica increased her pace and began calling again. The ground beneath her boots was growing warmer and softer. She dreaded the thought of aiming her torch downwards to see what was happening to it; instead she focused the light on the void before her. As she jogged along, the light occasionally illuminated the walls and Veronica noted that they were stretching further apart. Something was dripping from them without a sound. There was no way she was still in the forest.

When she called her friends again, she gasped at a sound not too far ahead. She thought it'd been a groan. She sprinted into the darkness, clutching her torch and rope and almost tripped over the slouched figure of Jaden.

'Jaden!' she cried. The torchlight flew over his features, telling Veronica all she needed to know: he was hurt. Blood was dripping from his nose and mouth. She shrieked, dropped the torch, and began to shake Jaden by the shoulders. Soon enough, she heard a voice from the darkness.

'What time is it...?'

Veronica stopped and picked her torch back up to direct it to the space beside Jaden. It was Georgia, lying face-down on the ground. When she sat up, Veronica became aware that she was also injured: she had a crimson gash across her forehead.

‘Georgia?’

She blinked and shook her head, realisation setting in. ‘Oh, ‘sup, Veronica? How’d you get down here?’

‘Never mind that,’ Veronica said. ‘Help me get Jaden up—we’ve gotta go.’ She moved to shake his shoulder again, but Georgia motioned for her to step back. Without any further prompting, she began slapping Jaden repeatedly until a series of moans came from his throat.

‘Quit it, *quit it!*’ he snapped, jumping to his feet. ‘I’m up!’

‘Then we’re leaving,’ Veronica said, standing. ‘You can tell me what happened when we get out of here.’

‘Okay, but question,’ Georgia said, dragging herself to her feet. ‘How’d you get past that thing?’

‘Thing?’

‘Yeah, the thing with lots of legs and eyes.’

Veronica didn’t move. Jaden turned to her and could just make out her horrified expression in the torchlight. ‘You didn’t see it, did you?’

She slowly shook her head.

‘Well ya might soon,’ Georgia said, looking past her friends. Veronica held her breath and could faintly make out a scuttling sound in the direction Georgia was facing.

‘Stay close and don’t look back,’ Veronica instructed. No more words were said as the three tore back through the cave along the path of the rope.

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It was well and truly storming now, with rain slamming down like the world was ending. The cave offered little safety from it to Robert who was now drenched. However, not once had his gaze left the direction of the darkness where he now watched his three friends charging towards him. Jaden and Georgia’s faces were

covered in blood. Veronica looked like she was about to cry. They arrived and stopped in front of Robert, whose expression was a mixture of concern and joy.

For a while no one said anything, and the cacophony in the skies above was all they could hear. Then Robert jerked his thumb back behind him, towards town. ‘I’ve uh,’ he said. ‘Got some Disney movies at my place. And a heater. You guys want to come over? Tell me all about it?’

Georgia made some sort of discontent sound and Jaden shoved her.

‘Sounds great, Robert,’ Veronica sighed. ‘Let’s get out of here.’