

ETHYR

MP FOLLIN



Castleton Press

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Go on in.
I dare you.

Chapter One

The Day It Started

If Skyler had known what was lurking inside the game, he *never* would have booted up. But on that morning, he got up early so he could play Ethyr without his mom bugging him to “turn that thing off.”

He plopped down on his beanbag chair, wriggled in, balanced the laptop on his knees—just like the day before, and the day before that, too. When the start-up screen opened, he got the same flutter he always got when he logged in.

Funny how you can be having the worst day of your life and not even know it.

As soon as his buddy list opened up, he checked to see who was there. No one. *Dang*. A whole hour before he had to catch the bus, and none of his friends were online. He clicked on **MOONSCAPE**. The navigator compass turned slow circles, a never-ending wait for the game to load.

Zuubnk! Skywyz12 spawned at the south moon base camp, on most days a bustling hub packed with other players buying supplies.

Today, the base camp was empty.

To get to his locker, Skyler tapped the mouse, which was on a stack of books by his chair. He dragged his jetpack off the top shelf and put it on Skywyz12.

A slight nudge from Skyler, and Skywyz12 swooped over a craggy ledge, a wicked plunge into the Galaksha Crater. One sharp swipe against a red-hot boulder on the crater floor, and death would be instant. Even so, he flew in close, barely skimming the smoldering rocks so he could pick up some heat. He needed to build up his supply of quark packs so he could navigate the Substrata Caverns without getting wiped out by subterranean crawlers.

The last time that happened, it took forever to replenish his stock.

Maybe he would buy a new body. Eddie had gone back to the BodyShop and changed his. It took awhile to get used to his friend's new look, but Skyler liked it.

His own avatar, SkyWyz12, had spiky, dark brown hair that sprouted out of his head. SkyWyz12 had muscles, of course, but Skyler had chosen a tall, wiry build, and now he wished he had picked a stockier one. Shorter bodies gave you an advantage in hand-to-hand combat. He was almost out of Ethyrean coynes, so he'd have to execute a few tasks if he wanted to buy another shape.

SkyWyz12 was still alone on the moon. Weird. Usually, there were a bunch of moon bouncers hopping around with him, trying to gain heat, health or coynes.

Oh, wait. Someone was bounding toward him, over the Cretin Dune. He couldn't wait to tell Eddie he'd gotten the whole moon to himself, at least until this guy showed up.

Skyler vaulted over a ridge and took off. The other lone traveler hit **FOLLOW**, instantly attaching himself to SkyWyz12. The guy had the same build as SkyWyz12, but he wore a fencing mask, a black, oval screen covering his face. Together, they whipped around the Moonscape at nano-speed. After a few orbits, Skyler landed on what looked like solid ground and typed a query to his companion.

“Hey.”

No answer.

“Whazzup?”

Silence.

Skyler rolled over the guy's avatar to pick up his screen name. Nothing. He didn't even know you could create an avatar without a screen name.

He hit the arrow key and burst back out over the Galaksha Crater. *Eat my dust, pal.* But the guy hung on. Skyler wished he knew how to block a **FOLLOW**.

No time to figure that out now—a meteoroid was tumbling toward him, fast. He dropped beneath it.

What the—?!

From what Skyler could tell, the other player split from SkyWyz12—a quick leap *over* the meteoroid—then snapped back.

No way could anybody stick to somebody else *that* good.

Skyler dropped into the crater. Maybe he could knock the guy off by grazing a hot rock. He zeroed in on a bony finger of granite rising from a pool of lava, took aim, cut it close. When his health meter fell to point five, he whipped back up.

His strange companion was still with him. Only now, the guy was upside down, his feet sticking straight up. How was he *doing* all this stuff? And there was *still* no one on the moon. Even the guy's mask looked creepy, although SkyWyz12 often wore one of his own. But that was only when he was fighting.

It seemed more like this guy was hiding.

“What’s your problem?” Skyler wrote.

Words popped up, one by one, over the guy’s feet. “If you must know, Skyler Beam, I’ve been looking for you.”

Quickly, Skyler hit the logout icon. Checkerboard wallpaper filled his screen, each square a picture of his grandma on the porch swing at her house in Louisiana.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Was that his heart? He could feel it in his ears. He shut the lid, but still felt jumpy, like the guy might sneak up behind him or something. He tried to tell himself the missing screen name was just a glitch. Yeah, that’s it. A glitch. Or maybe it was a dumb kid from school, messing with him.

But later, when he hopped on the bus, he couldn't shake the guy in the mask. Who was he? And was that even a game he was playing, or was it something else?

~ ~ ~

“Skyler Beam, wake up!”

Skyler lifted his head. It felt like a bowling ball. Mrs. Butler loomed above his desk, scowling at him over wire-framed glasses, her breath peppermint-candy sharp. “I’m warning you,” she said. “The final review of square roots is *not* something you want to sleep through.”

Skyler wiped his mouth with his sleeve and saw a puddle of drool on his math book. He dabbed it with his elbow. He pictured himself, shaggy brown hair, head down on his desk, mouth open—was he snoring?

B-r-r-r-ing!!

He slammed his book shut. He wanted to get to the cafeteria early so he could drop his backpack on a chair at an empty round table. Sitting down at a table full of kids was the worst. They never said *hey*.

At his old school, the cafeteria tables were long, skinny rectangles the janitors folded up against the wall at night. You could sit anywhere and not feel like you were butting in. Not that it mattered to him at Churchill. He had tons of friends to sit with there. But now that he and his mom had moved to this dinky town—could there be a more boring

name than Jonesville?—the school was so puny, the cafeteria was a cramped room, almost like a hallway, with a dozen or so round tables.

He plopped his brown bag on an empty table in the back corner. Bagging his lunch was one of the ways his mom said they needed to ‘cut corners’ when she lost her job in April. *It’s only temporary*, she said. Now it was June, and she still hadn’t found a new one.

He almost died when he stuck his nose in his lunch the first day she packed it. She had written him a note. Didn’t she know? Sixth-grade was way too old for moms to stick notes in their kids’ lunches.

But now, when he unzipped a zip-loc baggie and slid a peanut butter and jelly sandwich out, he kind of wished there was a note for him, written on notepad paper in his mom’s even hand, the letters looping around in curlicues.

He sighed, a big *whoosh*. An empty straw wrapper slid across the table. He opened his spiral notebook, the metallic blue one he liked to doodle in during lunch. On the lower corner of the inside cover, he had penned his Ethyr screen name.

Unlike Skyler, SkyWyz12 had friends. Tons of them. He had added almost all the boys in his class at Churchill to his buddy list—and some of the girls, too—and some new kids that weren’t even from Virginia. At night and on weekends they would skim the lunar craters on hoverboards, catching up in chat what he was missing out on since he moved away. Sometimes, they set up challenges, like when they all

met in the dojo and clobbered each other on mats until their health meters ran out.

He should have gone to the dojo this morning instead of the Moonscape. He'd probably have his brown belt by now, and he wouldn't have had that run-in with what's-his-face. It was, in fact, that weird guy who made him fall asleep in math. He had slipped into a dream, trying to figure out what it was about the Moonscape that felt so strange that morning.

A shadow darkened his notebook. He snapped it shut. Someone was behind him, and he didn't want whoever it was to see his sketches. The shadow passed. It turned out to be Ellie Claire Martin, a girl who sometimes sat at Skyler's table.

"Hey," Skyler said.

"Hey," she said, taking the seat across from him.

A hand yanked an empty chair away from the table. Trey Crofton—decked out in tight blue jeans and a skater's beanie—sat down, followed by his buddies, Luke Hanson and Mrs. Butler's son, Cody, both wearing the same thing as Trey. Skyler wondered if they had texted each other before school to plan their uniforms. He could see them now, spinning cartwheels and waving pom-poms—a dorky beanie squad in matching outfits.

He glanced at the big-faced clock over the EXIT sign. Seventeen minutes until lunch was over.

"Hey, Skyboy," Trey said, his mouth flapping open and shut to reveal an over-sized wad of pink gum. He put his bowl of spaghetti, his carton of milk on the table, then

shoved his empty tray in front of Skyler. “Watcha got there? Did mommy pack your lunch?”

Skyler guessed that Fig Newtons wrapped in wax paper with the edges folded squarely over the sides might be a dead give-away he did not make his own lunch.

“I’m talkin’ to you, Skyboy.” The gum-chewing boy nudged his tray and jabbed Skyler in the chest.

“Aren’t I lucky,” Skyler mumbled.

“What?”

“I *said*, what do you want, Crofton?”

“Nothin’ *you* got, that’s for sure.”

Ellie Claire sneezed.

“Cooties!” Cody clutched at his throat, gagging.

“Yeah, Chinese cooties!” Trey turned to snarl at Ellie Claire. “So how’s your lunch, AH SO? That *is* your name, isn’t it? Or maybe it *should* be.”

Ellie Claire looked down at her tray, took a bite of spaghetti. Skyler saw that her hands were small, and she had a thin piece of leather tied around her left wrist. Her fork was clutched in her fist, tight.

“Can’t you talk?” Trey asked. “What is this? The stoopid table?”

It is now, Skyler thought.

Cody piped up. “Dude. Look at her eyes.”

“Yeah. Hey, AH SO,” Trey said. “How can you see through those things? I bet you can’t even see this.” Trey waved his hands, trying to get Ellie Claire to look.

The Beanie Squad loved that one. They laughed—big, fake laughs—and pounded the table. But in a sudden shift,

they started talking about the Saturday before when they had drawn chalk lines in the school parking lot to practice for the sixth-grade skateboarding tournament. They had skated from one side to the other, using a stopwatch to see who won.

By the time the bell rang, Skyler and Ellie Claire were forgotten. Trey and his buddies were too busy shoving each other, fighting over who was going to win the tournament.

But when Trey scooped his half-eaten lunch off the table, he turned to Skyler. “Hey, Skyboy. Why don’t you enter the tournament? I’m sure we could all use a laugh, watching you fall on your butt.”

Just ignore him, Skyler could almost hear his mom say.

After the Beanie Squad left, Ellie Claire stood up. Her waist-length black hair fell forward as she cleared her place. Before she slid her tray off the table, she looked at Skyler. “I’m not Chinese,” she said. “I’m Korean.”

Her piercing brown eyes told Skyler something else Trey and his thickheaded pals would never know.

Ellie Claire Martin saw everything.

That afternoon, Skyler climbed on the bus to go home. He slumped back in his seat, his nose pressed against the window. It was Friday, which meant he had two whole days of freedom—no bonehead skaters and no peppermint stink when Mrs. Butler wandered too close to his desk.

Ellie Claire sat a couple of seats in front of him. They had nodded a *hey* to each other as he passed her to grab an empty seat. The skaters were in the back of the bus making

faces at drivers in cars and yanking the air, trying to get truckers to honk.

It was Skyler's bad luck he lived on the same side of town as the skaters. He was pretty sure that was why he had gotten off to such a lousy start at Jonesville Middle School. On day one, Trey and his buddies had scanned the rows of seats when they boarded the bus, sniffing out a new kid, looking for somebody to torture.

The driver turned down Chestnut Lane and pulled up to Skyler's house—small, brick and nestled between two houses that looked just like his. Skyler hopped off the bus, ran inside, let the screen door close behind him. *Smack!*

“Don't slam the door, Skyler.” His mother was sitting at the kitchen table, the laptop open in front of her. “How was school?”

“I hate school. Can we get a dog?” Skyler slung his backpack over one of the chairs.

“Put your stuff away. And please don't ask me again about a dog. I told you, we'll get one when I get a job. That's a promise.”

“Promises, promises,” Skyler muttered to himself.

He already knew what kind of dog he was going to get. A Black Lab named Buster. Skyler was going to feed him and take him for walks, and Buster would sleep in Skyler's room.

He'd also be a good watchdog. Sometimes, before Skyler fell asleep at night, he would lie there, listening for noises. He was almost as tall as his mother now, and if a burglar broke into their house, he'd be the one who would

have to fight him off, since his dad wasn't around. Each night before he went to bed he checked the doors twice to make sure they were locked, but he'd feel a lot better if Buster were there to help him keep an eye on things.

He grabbed a bag of chips. "Are you almost done with the laptop?" he asked.

"What do you need it for?"

"Ethy." "

"Why don't you go outside? You spend too much time plugged in to this thing. You can play tomorrow."

"Come on, Mom. It's Friday. Geez. Give me a break."

"No. You give *me* a break. I'm tired of you hounding me all the time when I'm using the computer. Now do me a favor and take some hotdogs out so they'll thaw in time for dinner."

Skyler yanked open the freezer and slammed a frozen eight-pack of hotdogs on the counter.

"Skyler." His mom shut the lid of the laptop, halfway. "What's the matter?"

Skyler could see the keyboard, his fingers itching to tap the keys. "Nothing," he said.

"Come on. Something's bothering you. What is it?"

"What *isn't* it?" he almost yelled. "This is the worst place. Why can't we move back home?"

He saw a slight flicker in his mom's eyes. Her voice became soft, like she knew how he felt, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"I know it hasn't been easy for you," she said.

"Everything here is so different from what you're used to.

But you'd be surprised how long it takes to get used to a new place. Maybe you'd like to invite some of the old gang to come spend a weekend. How about Eddie and Brian?"

"So they can be bored out of their eyeballs like me? No thanks. I'll just stick to hanging out with them in Ethyr."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Ethyr."

"I don't get it."

"We hang out there."

"Hang out? Can you talk to each other?"

"Sure. Well, not talk exactly. You type stuff and it shows up over your head."

"So you're saying you get together with Eddie and Brian when you go to this other world thing?"

"Yeah. I talk to 'em all the time."

His mother paused for a moment. "I'll make a deal with you," she said. "Go outside and get some sunshine. One hour. Then you can come back in and play your game."

He pretended to think about it, as if his mom would let him say 'no' if he wanted to.

Yeah, right.

Out loud he said, "Deal."

In a way, that worked. Skyler hadn't been to the dog pound in a while. He liked to drop by the Lee County Animal Shelter every few days to see if someone had turned Buster in. He swore to himself that if a Black Lab showed up, he was going to bring him home, no matter what.

He glanced at the kitchen clock before heading out, barely hearing his mom over the *thwack* of the screen door: “See you in two shakes of a lamb’s tail, honey!”

Something about the way the sun lit up his backyard made him hop down the steps. All day, the freak that followed him in Ethyr had been on his mind, bugging him. But out here in the sunshine, he felt the way you do when a nightmare finally wears off, and you know none of it was true.

Little did Skyler know, he was wrong about that.

Dead wrong.

