

# THE WORLD BETWEEN BLINKS

BETWEEN

## REBELLION OF THE LOST



AMIE KAUFMAN AND RYAN GRAUDIN





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 HarperCollins *Children's Books*

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FOR PIP AND SABRIEL—  
WE'RE SO LUCKY WE FOUND YOU.



## INCIDENT REPORT

COMPILED BY CURATOR PARK MIN-JUN

(RATING: 9.98/10)

*After going back through records and interviewing several witnesses, I, Curator Park Min-jun, have compiled the following report. It is an abridged account of what is now known to Curators as "The Creaturo Incident," since its antagonist was the Agent of Chaos himself, one Christopher Creaturo.*

*Christopher Jacob Creaturo entered the World Between Blinks on July 4, 1949. He got himself lost in order to find his one true love, Hazel Susan Clive, who arrived here on January 12, 1945. His mission? To restore Hazel's faded memories and find a way to return them both safely home. This was, of course, against the Administrator's rules. But Christopher did not care. He spent more than seventy years searching for a way to save Ms. Clive.*

*Then, finally, he found the Beruna cousins.*

*Jake Beruna and Marisol Contreras Beruna crossed into the World Between Blinks through the Morris Island Light—a lighthouse currently crumbling off the coast of Folly Beach, South Carolina, in the United States of America in the old world. They were discovered by the crew of the Patriot and*

*dropped off in the care of a Curator. Or so they thought. Unbeknownst to everyone, this man was actually Christopher Creaturo in disguise.*

*After that, the records get . . . fuzzy. There was a break-in at our Crystal Palace records repository, and ledger 341,069.512 went missing. Once Jake and Marisol were caught by the Aral Sea, they admitted that Christopher had asked them to steal the book. What they did not admit, yet was glaringly obvious through our monocles, was that Mr. Creaturo had used the ledger to send the Loch Ness Monster back home, creating a crack in the Unknown fabric between the worlds. My colleagues and I were distraught, and we urged the children to fix their mistake. Find Christopher Creaturo and return the ledger, we told them. Only then can we send you home.*

*The Beruna cousins chased Christopher Creaturo far and wide! Amelia Earhart reports she met the children at the Frost Fair, where they befriended Oz the Tasmanian tiger. The SS Baychimo's passenger log records them sailing to the underwater cities shortly after. Witnesses place them at Queen Nefertiti's court in the ever-stretching desert. They even parachuted from an airplane into the Amazon rainforest, according to explorer Colonel Percy Fawcett! Many of these locations correspond with new tears in the Unknown, created by Christopher as he sent items from the stolen ledger back to the old world. I surmise he was testing a method he might use to transport himself and Ms. Clive back as well.*

*Jake and Marisol eventually caught Christopher Creaturo, but instead of turning him over to the authorities, they decided to help him save Hazel Clive. Could this be because they found out Christopher was, in fact, their beloved Nana's brother? Which would make him their great-uncle! Perhaps. I have no way to confirm this theory.*

*Whatever the case, the Beruna cousins became involved in not one, but two more robberies. The ledger containing Mr. Creaturo's entry went missing from the Crystal Palace. Four hourglasses disappeared from the Great Library of Alexandria and were used to restore the lost memories of Ms. Clive, Mr. Creaturo, and the Beruna cousins. Their names were crossed out of their respective ledgers by an unknown person, and they were sent home.*

*Most of my colleagues consider this outcome disastrous.*

*I myself am not so sure. It felt much more like a happy ending to me. . . .*

*On a related note: I have received several verbal complaints from citizens about the current memory repository system. They do not believe it is fair. I am beginning to agree and propose that we bring up the subject for review at the next committee meeting.*



## MARISOL

IT WAS A PERFECT DAY TO GET LOST.

Marisol Contreras Beruna leaned over the ferry's railing, letting alpine air thread through her hair as she peered into the waters below. Lake Titicaca was much clearer than the waves off Folly Beach—so clear that she could see the reflection of the sky on its surface and the killifish weaving through the green weeds just beneath. As the boat pulled away from the dock, Marisol stared even harder, trying to see traces of a lost city below.

Wanaku.

When she and her cousin Jake had been stuck inside the World Between Blinks, nearly six whole months ago, they'd wandered through the lost parts of this underwater city, breathing with the aid of the enchanted bubbler charms strung on their necklaces. Fish swam around the



cousins' heads and llamas strolled past, their fur swishing with the currents. The brightly woven fabrics floating around Wanaku's other inhabitants had made Marisol feel at home.

Now it was the opposite: Marisol *was* home. Well, she was on vacation with her family at Copacabana, but she was still in Bolivia, still on Earth, for that matter. Marisol was home, and she wanted to see something that made her feel like she was back in the World Between Blinks.

She was itching for another adventure. Life had gone back to normal after her summer at Nana's house. She'd flown home to La Paz, where the calendar filled up with school and Saturdays spent rock climbing with Dad and FaceTime calls with Jake.

These things were fine, but they didn't make her heart race or her fingers tingle.

They didn't make her feel *magical*.

The boat began picking up speed, and soon the water was too deep to see any hints of a lost civilization.

"Don't fall in, Reina! It's a long swim to Isla del Sol!" Her mother had made the family wear life jackets, even though most of the other tourists didn't bother and Victor wasn't anywhere *near* the water. Her older brother sat in the center of the boat, slouched so his life jacket reached his ears and his feet sprawled for miles. He was so busy

tapping on his phone that Marisol wasn't even sure he knew they'd left the dock.

"I'll be careful," Marisol promised as she played with her necklace. The bubbler that helped her breathe underwater didn't work on this side of the Unknown. The charm's magic had stayed in the World Between Blinks, so now it was just a fish scale, hanging on the chain beside her other charms.

There was a small scroll, a monocle, and an hourglass too.

She kept them tucked under her shirt, mostly because of Victor, who'd snorted when he noticed her strange jewelry. *Why would you want to wear a bunch of junk? You look like one of Nana's display cabinets!*

This was supposed to be an insult, but thinking about their grandmother's sprawling collections of seashells and stamps and sugar spoons made Marisol's heart swell. *I love Nana's cabinets!* she'd replied.

Her older brother wore a bewildered look. *You're lucky our new distant cousin Christopher does too. I still can't believe he wants to keep Nana's beach house the way it is after paying so much money for it. . . .*

Marisol knew this wasn't luck. Not really, but she couldn't exactly tell Victor the truth about Christopher—that he was Nana's long-lost brother, and his wife, Hazel, had been their grandmother's best friend, and they'd been

lost in a different world for almost seventy years. Buying Nana's beach house was Christopher's way of finally coming home. He'd saved the place for the rest of his family too. Otherwise, they would've had to sell it to a stranger.

"Mari!" Her dad waved her out of these memories. There was a guidebook in his hands and a gleam in his eyes. "Want to read about the sites we're going to see today?"

Victor glanced up from his phone. "Isn't that what we're paying a tour guide for?"

"There are over eighty ruins on the island," their father explained. "We won't be able to visit them all, but we can do our research. It's important to learn about history and the people who came before us."

"¡Sí!" Marisol agreed. Granted, reading about history wasn't as thrilling as seeing it with her own two eyes, but there was nothing else to do on the hour-and-a-half boat ride.

Dad smiled, then picked up the book. "Isla del Sol is named the 'Island of the Sun' in honor of the Incan sun god. Many of the settlements here date back to the fifteenth century—"

"Does it say anything about a city called Wanaku?" Marisol couldn't help asking.

"Hmm . . ." Her dad started scanning the pages. "Let's see."

“No,” Victor grunted.

“How would you know?” she challenged her brother.

“I just looked it up.” He said, still immersed in the screen. “Wanaku is from much earlier, before the Incans. The city belonged to the Tiwanaku people and was considered a legend until its temple was discovered underneath the lake. There have been over two hundred dives done to document the ruins.”

Marisol laughed. Victor almost sounded like a Curator, reading a file entry through a monocle. There was no way to explain why she thought this was funny, though, and her brother’s eyes narrowed.

“How would *you* know about Wanaku, hermana?”

The real answer? *I was summoned to a world full of lost things with our cousin Jake, where we walked through Wanaku’s underwater streets with a very excited Tasmanian tiger named Oz. I saw the legendary city of Kitezsh too. And the Lost City of Z. Oh, and I flew with Amelia Earhart. She helped us parachute into the Amazon rainforest to chase down our great-uncle Christopher Creaturo and a magical ledger of lost things he tricked us into stealing.*

For a brief moment Marisol wanted say all of this, if only to see the look on Victor’s face.

“We learned about it in school,” she answered instead.

Their father looked thrilled. “Knowledge is power, no matter how you find it!”

He went back to reading.

Marisol listened to the story of the Incan sun god's birth, while the more literal sun beat overhead. It was as bright as an unshaded light bulb, glaring off distant white-capped mountains, turning the lake into something sparkling. It looked a lot like the Great Mogul Diamond she'd found in the World Between Blinks. Queen Nefer-titi had given the giant jewel to Marisol as a gift, but it was too much to carry in the end. She chose to throw the diamond away so she could save Hazel from the Curators.

Marisol's chest ached, remembering this. It wasn't because she regretted the decision—love, she'd learned, was worth far more than diamonds—but because she wanted to go back. Back to ancient Egyptian royalty and valiant explorers, to buried treasures and adventure on every horizon. Her hands fidgeted with her life jacket, finding their way to the necklace beneath. She never took it off, even when she went to sleep, just in case the Unknown decided to call her again.

Was it?

Calling?

Her magnet fingers felt glittery now, but that could've been because Marisol was squeezing her charms so hard. Or because something on this boat had been lost.

There had been many moments like this over the past six months, when Marisol's gift for finding lost

things flared, and she hurried to follow it, hoping to turn a corner and bump into Amelia Earhart. But these hunts always ended with trinkets. Mom’s keys. (Again. Always.) A knight piece from Victor’s untouched chess set. Dad’s climbing shoes. Once, she’d found a fifty bolivianos banknote on the sidewalk.

It was a lot of money.

And she’d still been disappointed.

As Isla del Sol came into view—with so many hills and stones and twisty eucalyptus trees—Marisol felt the pull in her fingers getting stronger. Her heart began pounding with excitement. If she hadn’t been wearing such a puffy life jacket, she was sure everyone would be able to hear it.

“Do y’all all have your water bottles? Snacks?” Mom asked as their boat docked. “Sunscreen?”

“Sí. Sí. Sí.” Victor gave an exaggerated groan and hoisted the backpack. “I think we have enough food to last a week.”

The road out of the port was rocky and, according to their guide, old. It had been built by the Incans, who seemed to enjoy climbing hills. Marisol’s heart thrummed faster and faster as they hiked to the north end of the island—partly because of the exercise, but mostly because her magnet fingers were still buzzing. She kept waiting for something around her to change. But Lake Titicaca remained Lake Titicaca, and all the rocks stayed where

they were. Including the square stone slab of the Mesa Ceramónica and Titikala—a sacred cliff that looked like a puma.

“The next set of ruins is called Chincana!” Their guide’s English was clear but thinned out by the fierce lake wind. “In Quechua this translates into labyrinth! Or, more literally, ‘the place where one gets lost.’”

Marisol stopped short.

This had to be a thin space . . . right?

She knew there were windows into the World Between Blinks all over this world. Nana had traveled to a lot of these spots, and she had been careful to mark them on her many maps—using Xs that weren’t Xs at all, but an inverted version of Christopher Creaturo’s initials.  $\infty$ . Marisol had memorized every single drawing that hung on the walls of her grandmother’s beach house. Nana’s adventures had taken her everywhere: Cairo’s pyramids, base camp at Mount Everest, a complex of ancient temples in the Cambodian jungle, a crumbling castle on a cliff top in Ireland, and on and on. There were no maps of Lake Titicaca in the collection, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a door here.

It just meant one hadn’t been discovered yet.

“OOF!” Victor stumbled into Marisol, the phone flying out of his hands and onto the road. “Watch where you’re going, Mari!”

“I wasn’t moving.” She picked up the iPhone. Or *eye-*phone, as Amelia Earhart had called it. A better name, maybe, since Victor’s were always so glued to the screen. Right now it was displaying a chess game.

“Watch where you’re stopping, then!” Her brother scowled.

She handed back the phone and ran to catch up with the rest of the group.

Chincana—*the place where one gets lost*—looked nothing like the last thin space Marisol had slipped through. The Morris Island Light was tall, for one thing. These ruins were short. Made with sand-toned stones that had been sculpted by hundreds of years of wind and rain. Plants grew from the cracks, and windows framed bright blue views of the lake.

But there were darker corners too.

Ones that made her fingers hum.

Ones that promised to turn into a different world entirely.

“We believe Incan priests used to train here. . . .”

The guide’s voice faded, lost to the winds again, as Marisol crept closer to the ruins. She wasn’t entirely sure what to expect. Another shiny key? A window that looked out onto the ever-stretching desert? Sir Percy Fawcett—the explorer—sitting on a quagga?

She stepped into the maze of stones and pulled out



her necklace, studying its hourglass hopefully. In the World Between Blinks, the charm was used to keep track of a person's memories. Marisol and Jake had spent the final fading gold days of summer—their last days together after their adventures—testing these time-pieces in Nana's attic. Jake's theory was that if the sand stuck to the top, that might mean that the other World was close. . . .

Marisol held her breath and turned the hourglass around, watching the grains inside. To her disappointment, they fell, obeying gravity instead of the magic of the Unknown.

"Hey!" She jumped at the sound of Victor's voice. Her brother stood in a doorway, blinking off his last digital chess move. Looking . . . disoriented. He must've followed her here without realizing that she'd snuck away from the tour on purpose. He was probably just staring at her feet while he played, lost in his game. "Where's the rest of the group?"

"They're back on the path." Marisol sighed. Her fingers had stopped buzzing: another dead end. "Atrás de ti."

Victor looked over his shoulder. "No, they're not."

"What?" Marisol froze. Was she imagining things, or did the walls suddenly look taller? There didn't seem to be as many plants in them either. It was as if all of

Chincana's missing stones had filled in. As if the ruins and its lost masonry were overlapping. . . .

She ran to the nearest window.

The water looked different. It was blue still, but rough with waves, and Marisol spotted a dorsal fin that was *much* too big to belong to a killifish. Her fingers shook with excitement as she pressed the monocle to her eye. If its magic was back, the charm would show her the entries that Curators wrote for every single person, place, and thing that turned up in the World.

Sure enough, words began to scroll through the eyepiece's glass: *Megalodon, swam Earth's oceans 3.6 million years ago. KEEP OUT OF RESIDENTIAL ZONES AT ALL COSTS!*

She never thought she'd be so happy to see a megalodon again. "We made it, Jake! We're back!"

"Did you just call me Jake? You're acting really weird, hermana."

*Oh . . .* Marisol dropped the monocle and turned back to her brother. *Oh no.*

The overlap was already disappearing, most of Chincana's stones fading back to the Bolivian side of the Unknown. The ones that were left—the ones that had migrated to the World Between Blinks—looked as if they were floating around Victor's head. He was too busy frowning at his screen to notice.

“Victor—”

“My phone is acting weird too.”

“Victor,” she tried again.

It was no use. Her brother hardly ever paid attention to her, and most of the time Marisol was fine with this. They didn’t have much in common now that Victor was a teenager, and he’d never been young enough to believe Nana’s stories. The ones Marisol lived and breathed and laughed by. The ones that had eventually led her here.

“I know this island gets service.” He held his iPhone toward the sky, waving it wildly. “It was working fine just a second ago!”

“Victor Contreras Beruna!”

“¿Qué?” he asked, slightly irritated.

“¡Mira!” Marisol waved at the scene around them. “Look!”

Her brother turned, his eyes widening when he realized that the labyrinth’s walls were no longer there. Mostly. “Um . . . why are those rocks floating?”

“Tranquilo,” Marisol said quickly. “Don’t freak out.”

But Victor kept turning. The drawstrings of his red hoodie whipped around and around. His questions sounded dizzy. “Where are Mom and Dad? Where are *we*?”

“Mom and Dad are on Isla del Sol. We’re . . .” It was Marisol’s turn to look around. *Sí*, they were in the World Between Blinks, but it was a big place, filled with jungles

and submerged cities and desert kingdoms. She and Victor were standing on a hill—both sides sloping down into the ocean. There were no trees in sight. “We’re on a different island.”

It was the easiest answer she could offer. Victor didn’t look like he could handle anything else. After a few more spins he sat, his backpack landing on the ground with a *WHUMPH*.

“I’ll call the navy.” His voice sounded wobbly. “They’ll send a boat for us.” Marisol watched her brother swipe his screen, then frown. “Well, I would, but I don’t have any signal.”

“That’s because we just passed through the Unknown,” she told him.

“The what?”

“The Unknown.”

“What’s the unknown?”

“The Unknown. With a capital *U*,” Marisol emphasized. “It’s a veil of magic that separates our world and this one.”

“This one?” repeated Victor.

“Remember how Mom used to read us stories where children discover a magical land through a wardrobe?” Victor had never believed those tales either, but it was the easiest example Marisol could think of. “It’s kind of like that. Except this world is filled with stuff that’s been lost

back home—keys, socks, dogs, submarines. You can get most of those at the market at Ostia Antica. What you *can't* get is cell service, though. We had to use a walkie-talkie to call Amelia Earhart last time. . . .”

Victor clutched his phone to his chest, staring at Marisol as if she'd suddenly sprouted an extra head.

“Este es loco,” he whispered.

“It's not crazy.” She couldn't help but smile. “It's the World Between Blinks.”

Victor was not an ideal sidekick.

One hour into being stranded and he'd already eaten most of their snacks. Candy wrappers stuck out of his pockets, and the ground around him was littered with *salteña* crumbs. Marisol had to stash some of the savory pastries in her pocket, in case she and Victor weren't rescued before dinner. This was starting to look like a very real possibility. She kept scanning the horizon with her monocle, but there was no sign of the *Patriot*, which had rescued her and Jake last time, or any other ship. She didn't see any submarines either.

Victor lay on his back, digesting a dozen chicken *salteñas* along with the story she'd shared. “So you're telling me that you and Jake were stranded here for days on end last summer because Christopher Creaturo—who isn't

our second cousin at all, but Nana’s long-lost brother—wrote your names on a piece of paper?”

“It was a ledger page,” Marisol clarified.

“Oh, that makes so much more sense.”

She didn’t have to look away from the vast blue waves to know that Victor was rolling his eyes.

“The Curators use ledgers to record who gets lost here. Great-Uncle Christopher discovered he could call me and Jake to the World Between Blinks by writing down our names. He needed us to help rescue Hazel, his one true love.”

“And all four of you found your way back home?” Victor asked.

“Yep.”

Her brother fell into a thoughtful silence. It didn’t last long. “So, if Christopher and Hazel are at home right now, who wrote our names in the ledger this time?”

“Oh!” Marisol frowned. “I don’t know.”

She’d been so excited about the idea of returning to the World Between Blinks that she hadn’t stopped to wonder why the Unknown had let her through. Was it because she’d *wanted* to get lost in another adventure so badly? Or because someone in the World needed her?

And why, oh why, was Victor here too?

*Brothers are treasures*, Nana used to say, with a wink and a warm wrinkled smile. Marisol had more trouble

believing this than any of her grandmother's fanciful stories. It had only made sense once she found out about Great-Uncle Christopher and the  $\infty$  marks on all of her grandmother's treasure maps.

She could tell Victor was skeptical as well. He hadn't interrupted Marisol's story about the lighthouse and everything she and Jake had discovered afterward—but his lips stayed knotted in an *I'm-older-and-I-know-better* frown. Figures.

Stones would float before Victor took her seriously. . . .

"HEY!" Marisol's brother nearly bashed his head on a hovering piece of Chincana's wall when he shot to his feet. "OVER HERE! ¡POR AQUÍ!"

He was yelling at the sky. She soon saw why. There, hanging between clouds like an overripe fruit, was a hot-air balloon. Lemon yellow. Drifting. Two tiny figures rode in its basket. They were so far away, it was impossible for Marisol to tell if she recognized them.

Well, almost impossible.

She peered through her monocle, hoping to see a familiar name.

### *Patrol Balloon #37—Phantom Island Sector*

Marisol's stomach tightened as she read. *Patrol? Sector?* That sounded suspiciously organized. . . .

“WE’RE DOWN HERE!” Victor had taken off his hoodie and was waving it over his head like a flag. The figures in the basket waved back. “YES! HERE! ¡AQUÍ!” Wrappers fluttered around her brother’s boots as he started dancing. “They’re coming down, Mari! We’re saved!”

“I’m not so sure about that.” As the balloon drifted closer Marisol could see that its passengers were dressed in white. One of them was holding a clipboard. “Those are Curators.”

“They’re going to fix this?” Victor sounded so hopeful.

“They’d like to think so. . . .” Marisol’s stomach kept churning. She and Jake had had several run-ins with the Curators during their last trip here. Several *break-ins* too. She didn’t feel bad about stealing the ledgers, but she doubted the Curators in the balloon shared her sentiments.

The aircraft drew closer.

The ropes the Curators tossed out of the basket must have been woven with Unknown magic—no hands were needed to knot them around some floating stones. As soon as the balloon was anchored, a ladder dropped.

Victor ran toward it.

Marisol wanted to run in the other direction, but there was only sea there, and even though she had her bubbler



charm for breathing underwater, it wouldn't protect her from the megalodon.

"Hi! Hello! ¡Hola! Can you help us? Can you fly us back to Copacabana? We're staying there with my parents." Her brother was waving at the Curators—a man and a woman, who were both scribbling furiously onto some forms.

"Copacabana, you say?" The woman frowned. "What sector is that in?"

"Um . . . Bolivia?" Victor was met with a grim silence. He tried again. "South America? Earth?"

Both of the Curators lifted their monocles in unison.

"Identify yourselves!" the man commanded.

"What are your designations?" asked the woman.

"My name is Victor Contreras Beruna and this is my sister—"

Clearly no introduction was needed. When the woman official saw Marisol, she gasped with such drama that her monocle fell out. "The Crystal Palace Cat Burglar! The agent of the Agent of Chaos! Number four on the Administrator's Top Ten Most Wanted Rebels List!"

"What?" Now Victor was looking at his sister as if she'd sprouted *three* heads. "Mari?"

"Oh yes! She is wanted in all two hundred and fifty sectors! And counting!" The woman turned to her partner excitedly. "This will be sure to get us a promotion!"

“It will! If I can find the warrant.” The other Curator flipped through the blizzard that was his clipboard—white paper flurries. “Ah, here it is!” He held up the form for everyone to see. Sure enough, Marisol’s name was at the top in black and white. An angry-looking signature weighed down the bottom. “By orders of the Administrator, you, Marisol Contreras Beruna, are under arrest!”



## JAKE

JAKE STOOD FACE-TO-FACE WITH A DINOSAUR. He gazed up at the beast's jagged, yellowing teeth as it towered above him, head tilted thoughtfully, as if trying to decide whether he was food or not.

"You don't have a stomach," he told it.

When Hazel whispered in his ear, he jumped. "I hope you've got your T-rex repellent with you."

With a laugh, Jake turned away from the huge skeleton. There were several more like it, looming in this hall of the Melbourne Museum. Jake could even see a pterosaur strung up from the air-conditioned rafters. It looked strange without the skin that made up its wings.

"Mari and I never managed to buy any T-rex repellent when we were in the World Between Blinks," he told his great-aunt. "We spent most of our money on charms

and ship passages so we could chase Christopher. I don't think we'll need any peppermint spray on the *DINOSAUR WALK*, though."

He nodded at the display description behind them. The gray letters went on: *science and imagination bring prehistoric animals to life*. Hazel smiled as she read. Her grin was bright—easy to see with that signature red lipstick. It made Hazel look like a person from the 1940s, which, of course, she was. She'd also spent the past seventy years living in a world where dinosaurs were *more* than bones.

"It's a good thing this sign is exaggerating! I, for one, prefer my prehistoric animals fossilized." Hazel put her hands on her hips. She was wearing a slim-waisted yellow dress that looked like it came from a vintage boutique or another museum display. "Speaking of chasing Christopher, where in this world has my husband ended up? Honestly, you'd think he hadn't met a real dinosaur, the way he behaves around these displays."

She wandered off in search of Christopher, and Jake pulled out his phone, angling it up to snap a picture of the T-rex's empty eye sockets. He texted it to Aunt Cara's number with a screaming emoji—Marisol didn't have her own phone, but Aunt Cara would know who the message was for. Then he went back to wandering along the long avenue of bones.

He'd been amused when Hazel and Christopher had

wanted to visit the Melbourne Museum—after all, they’d practically lived in a museum during their last several decades in the World Between Blinks—but he had to admit the displays were kind of awesome.

He and his mom were just on a short posting to the United States Consulate here in Melbourne, Australia, which meant living in an apartment filled with other people’s furniture. Everything felt upside down.

It was summer here, even though it was winter back in South Carolina. School was out, so it was hard to meet anyone his age, and the hot weather always made him feel like he should be with all of his cousins at Nana’s house on Folly Beach. He liked the beaches here too, and he liked the gelato and the singing cicadas and the barbecues on long evenings, but his loneliness always got a little bit worse after the sun set.

So when his great-uncle Christopher—or his second cousin twice removed, as the rest of the family thought—and his new bride, Hazel, decided they wanted to honeymoon Down Under, Jake had been thrilled.

As he approached the end of the dinosaur walk, he looked up at the sign above the archway to the next exhibit. *WILD*, it read. He passed through and found himself in a large, bright, white room, with tiered steps on either side going all the way up to the ceiling. These held every kind of animal Jake could imagine, a tall red

kangaroo on his right and a grumpy-looking badger on his left. Each one had been carefully preserved—lovingly, even—by someone who wanted to show what the animals had been like when they were alive.

But they weren't alive. A small shiver of lostness traveled through Jake, from the nape of his neck to the tips of his fingers, as he gazed at them.

When he saw the next animal, tucked away in a case to his right, he stopped short.

It was a Tasmanian tiger, staring curiously through the glass, one paw forward, as if waiting to see if Jake would wave back. The eyes were glass too, of course. And the limbs were stuffed, but his heart tugged him to it, beating a little bit faster as he crouched in front of the display case.

“Now there's a memory.” Christopher's reflection appeared beside his, overlapping with the thylacine's fawn-colored fur. “He could be our Oz's twin, don't you think?”

“Yeah.” Even their stripes were the same: dark-brown marks laddering up the animal's back all the way to its stiff tail. Oz's would have been quivering. Jake felt a swell of sadness when he stared at it. “I wonder what he's doing now.”

“Probably hounding someone for a treat.” Christopher grinned and pushed to his feet, offering Jake a hand. “You know he's all right, don't you?”

“I know,” Jake said, taking his great-uncle’s hand and hauling himself up. “He was fine for a long time before he came on an adventure with us, and he’ll be fine now.”

They were both silent for a moment. Jake couldn’t exactly say he *missed* the World Between Blinks. After all, they’d seen some incredible sights—okay, a *lot* of incredible sights—but he’d spent most of his time there worried about getting back home.

And yet . . .

“Are *you* all right, Jake?” Christopher was staring at him, concerned. “You’ve got that look in your eye.”

Jake blinked. “What look?”

“The *faraway* look. The one that says you want to be somewhere else. Whenever I saw your nana staring off like that I knew she was fixing to take a trip—even if it was just to camp out in the sand dunes for a night or stow away on a shrimp boat.” His great-uncle gave a wry smile. “My sister wore that expression a lot.”

“She did, didn’t she?” Jake knew exactly what Christopher was talking about. Nana loved laughing with her grandkids—sprinkling extra sugar into their already-sweet tea and playing card games on her screened porch. But there were times when Jake would see her staring out past his shoulder at the ocean. “She took a lot of trips! I think maybe she spent more time on an airplane than Amelia!”

His great-uncle laughed, but the sound was short, and then it was Christopher who had that *faraway* look. Jake could suddenly see his age—not just the thirty years he appeared to be—but all that time he'd been lost in the World Between Blinks too. His blue eyes looked dusty. Then watery.

“I miss Lucy.” He said Nana’s name softly. “My sister was always there for me—even when I left her to go looking for Hazel. She searched all over this world for thin spots in the Unknown. Even when she got married. Even when she had children, then grandchildren. Even when she was sick. I just wish she’d lived long enough to see that we came home.”

Jake swallowed.

There was a time, not *too* long ago, where he might have stumbled away from this conversation, using some excuse about needing to use the restroom. But his adventures in the World Between Blinks had taught him that it was okay to have a lump in your throat. It was okay to cry when you had to say goodbye, because that was what happened when you loved someone.

“I’m sorry.” Christopher cleared his throat and pulled out a cloth handkerchief to dab his eyes.

“Don’t be sorry!” Jake didn’t have a fancy handkerchief, so he used his shirtsleeve instead. “Nana would want you to cry. I mean—she’d want you to miss her.



She'd want you to laugh too. She'd be happy that you and Hazel live in her house now. I know *I'm* happy about that," he added. "I can't wait to go back for Christmas."

Fine lines etched Christopher's eyes when he smiled. "You're welcome anytime." He put a hand on Jake's shoulder and squeezed. "Hazel and I will always be there for you, Jake. Even if we're half a world away."

"Thanks."

This word came out as a croak, and it didn't feel like nearly enough, but Jake couldn't say any more. He had to wipe his face with his other sleeve because the first one was too wet. Oz's cousin looked like a tan-and-brown blur.

"Now," Christopher said after a moment, "let's see what other mysteries from history we can find. Hazel's probably looking for us."

By silent agreement, they went hunting for a room that was completely different from the *WILD* display. They made their way back out past the dinosaurs and through a beautiful enclosed forest that stretched up over two stories tall. In the end, they chose the Melbourne Gallery, a display about the city itself.

Jake wasn't sure if it was the feeling of just having seen Oz, or reminiscing about Nana, or just the loneliness that had been chasing after him the last few weeks, but as he stood at the entrance of the gallery, he felt lostness

shimmer from his neck to his fingertips again. It tickled his nose, and for a moment he thought he smelled salt water. Huh.

The sensation faded as he turned to wander toward the row of glass cabinets, light glinting off them, each item inside laid out with a neat label explaining how and where it had been found and what part it had played in history. This section of the exhibit was about a sleek red racehorse called Phar Lap—his shoes and saddle were on display, and so was Phar Lap himself. Just like the animals in the *WILD* display, he'd been caught in a pose that made it seem as if he might take a step forward at any moment.

Jake couldn't help touching the chain around his neck, and the little monocle strung alongside the other charms. He always wore it—it reminded him of Amelia Earhart, of his friends the explorers, of Queen Nefertiti's court, and of the underwater cities. Looking through it had been a much more interesting way to learn about history. He . . .

*Huh.*

It looked like the museum had a second Tasmanian tiger. But what was it doing up here, away from all the other animals? It was kind of out of place, standing between a pillar and a bench, just behind Phar Lap. Maybe it was one of those things meant to tempt you to go check out other parts of the museum? But . . . where was its sign? Its display case?

A family passed between Jake and the Tasmanian tiger, a mother laughing as she herded along four children. “Jack, Raiden, Sabriel, the dinosaurs are this way! Freya, what are you doing?”

Though you weren’t meant to have food in a museum, the girl lifted her hand to her mouth as if she were yawning and definitely snuck a bite of something, her jaw working to chew it. When she saw Jake looking at her, she winked.

After they passed by, Jake almost expected the Tasmanian tiger to be gone, almost expected he’d been imagining it.

But the animal was still there.

And it looked for all the world like its nostrils were flaring. Like it was sniff-sniff-sniffing after the girl’s snack. But it couldn’t be.

Right?

Jake eased one step closer, and this time there was no mistaking it—the creature’s tail quivered, just the tiniest of movements, a greeting that escaped despite its best efforts to play at being a statue. Jake gasped.

“Jake?” Christopher and Hazel were already turning toward him.

“It’s, it’s . . .” He couldn’t finish the sentence, but he lifted one hand and pointed, then remembered other people were around and tried to turn it into a head scratch.

“Hot dog,” Jake’s great-uncle murmured. “That looks just like . . .”

The tail trembled again. Now Christopher and Hazel gasped too, frozen in place.

Hazel was the first to recover her senses, snapping into action. She grabbed Christopher’s arm, pulling him forward as she power walked over to Jake and the creature that was absolutely, unmistakably their friend Oz. She herded Jake before her too, and the three of them crowded around the Tasmanian tiger, shielding him from view. With the bench and the pillar behind him, and his three friends crowded around in front, Oz was quickly hidden from sight.

Jake dropped to a crouch, wrapping his arms around the thylacine, pressing his cheek to the creature’s fur. “What are you doing here?” he whispered. “Did we summon you somehow?”

Oz just whuffled at him, snorting softly into his ear.

“I’ve never heard of that happening.” Christopher ran a hand through his sunshiny hair. His blue eyes flooded with wonder. “Someone must have *sent* him. But why? And *how*?”

Oz twisted around and took the edge of Jake’s T-shirt in his teeth, tugging gently.

Jake blinked, then blinked again.

Between those two blinks, he caught a sudden flash

of sunlight, a glimpse of blue sky, a jolt of salt in his nostrils, and then it was gone.

“Jake,” Christopher whispered. “I know that look. What did you see?”

“The World,” Jake whispered back, barely believing it.

Christopher looked around wildly, head swinging, as if he were going to find a museum attendant who knew how to deal with this. One hand curled around Jake’s upper arm, holding tight and keeping him close.

Hazel was all business. “Jake, do you have your charms?”

*Always.* Jake had worn the necklace they were strung on for six months straight and now he pulled it out of his shirt with his free hand—the monocle was there, alongside an hourglass, a bubbler, and a small scroll, which helped him understand any language spoken in the World Between Blinks.

“My love,” said Hazel quietly, “he’s flickering.”

“No!” Fear flooded Christopher’s blue eyes—it was the same expression he wore all those years ago when Hazel faded from his sight in the field hospital. He’d fought for decades to bring her home, and now his grip tightened around Jake, not just squeezing but trying to anchor the boy. “No, hold on to him!”

“Christopher Creaturo, that’s not going to work,” she replied firmly. “What can we do to help him? Hurry!”

Christopher dug through his pockets and pulled out an object that looked like a flashlight. Jake knew it was far more special than that—the Illuminator’s light could shine through the sand of an hourglass, bringing all sorts of memories to life. Even forgotten ones.

“Take my Illuminator,” his great-uncle said, pressing the silver instrument into Jake’s hand. “You might not need to see memories, but this has a lot of value in the World. Maybe you can trade—no, another flicker!”

“We’ll tell your mother something,” Hazel promised. “Find a way back, Jake. Stick with Oz.”

Their advice was coming thick and fast, but he couldn’t help blinking, and he couldn’t hear them over the scream of seabirds.

*Blink.*

Oz’s cold nose pressed into his arm.

*Blink.*

The glare of sunlight off water.

*Blink.*

The fluorescent lights of the museum.

*Blink.*

A bright rainbow of color.

*Blink.*

“Find the cove,” Christopher said urgently. “I’ll be there for you! Just like Lucy was! I’ll write!”

“Wha-augghhhhhbbbbppffft!”

Jake opened his mouth to ask what in the worlds Christopher meant about a cove, and writing to him—how was that possible?—and suddenly he was swallowing seawater. The stuff was all around, above his head, cold and salty. He kicked his legs automatically, and a heartbeat later, before his bubbler charm even had time to help, he burst to the surface. Oz was beside him, and gave a delighted whuff as Jake shook wet hair out of his eyes and coughed.

Once his breath was steady, he doggy-paddled in a slow circle (so did Oz, or perhaps it was a tiger paddle) to get a look at his surroundings.

He was in a U-shaped harbor with a jumble of buildings packed into every available space around the edge of it, crowded together as if they wanted a good view of the water. He was back in the ancient Roman city of Portus, where he'd stopped with Marisol on their way to Queen Nefertiti's court.

But it wasn't nearly as busy as he remembered. There was a neat line of vessels making their way in and out of the harbor, one behind the other, as if they were following invisible traffic lanes. From submarines to catamarans, kayaks to schooners, sails flapped crisply and paddles flashed efficiently, and the sloppy waves from their wakes jostled Jake where he was treading water. Each of them seemed to have a large number prominently on display,

black numbers painted on a white background and pinned somewhere in clear view. He didn't remember that from his last visit either.

He grabbed an inflatable unicorn inner tube that didn't seem to be a part of the neat queues, slinging one arm over the float and wrapping the other around Oz. "Don't you try to climb on," he warned his friend. "Your claws will go right through it."

There was a tag tied to the unicorn's rainbow horn, and someone had labeled it in a neat hand: *Unicorn Inner Tube, orig. unknown, Zone 43, Permit No. 42956/3b.*

"What does that all mean?" Jake asked Oz.

Oz whined.

"Jake, Jake! Great Scott, it worked!"

As Jake twisted around to see who was calling to him, Oz broke free, paddling enthusiastically toward an approaching dinghy. A lean man with his face hidden under a broad-brimmed hat leaned down to scoop him up, and with a great scrabble of claws, the pair landed in the bottom of the boat.

But there was another figure still sitting on the cross bench, rowing toward Jake and the inflatable unicorn. "Oz, you weren't meant to go through the door to get him," she scolded. "How did you even manage that? Jake, are you all right?"

It was Amelia Earhart! And appearing over the



gunwale, dripping from Oz's welcome, was the explorer Raleigh Rimell. They were both Jake and Marisol's friends, and though he was glad to see them here, his head was swimming with questions.

Two pairs of hands reached down and helped Jake scramble up into the boat.

"Welcome back!" Raleigh began wringing out his shirt. He had a ready smile and a neat, dark moustache, his fair skin turned pink by a hint of sunburn.

Amelia shipped her oars and reached out with one hand to steady Oz, who was turning rapidly in circles as he tried to investigate his own wet tail, making the whole boat rock. Her auburn curls were still trying to escape from under her flying cap, though she wasn't wearing her leather jacket—and like Raleigh, her pale skin had seen a lot of sun lately, her freckles more numerous than ever.

"Amelia, Raleigh!" Jake coughed up a little water, and they thumped him helpfully on the back. "You're a long way from the Lost City of Z and a long way from . . . well, from an airplane! What are you doing at Portus?"

In answer, Amelia pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. The ink was bold. And *familiar*. Jake's and Marisol's names had been crossed out at the top of the torn-out ledger page—it was how they'd been sent back home last time—only now they were written *again* at the bottom.

Jake realized he had another question. “Wait, what am *I* doing at Portus?”

His rescuers exchanged a grim glance. “A lot’s happened since you left,” Raleigh replied. “That’s why we needed the two of you. Now, where’s Marisol and her magnet fingers?”

“Marisol?” Jake looked back down at the water, as if he might find his cousin bobbing there. “Did she come too?”

“We assumed she would.” Amelia glanced down at the page. “We wrote both of your names. We thought the two of you would pop out right here, where we wrote the note.”

“Why did you write the note in the middle of the harbor?” Jake asked, more bewildered than ever.

Amelia grimaced. “It’s hard to find a crack in the World that someone’s not keeping an eye on right now, and Queen Nefertiti wasn’t about to risk her Amber Room disappearing again, so this harbor was one of the only places where we could call you two back. But . . . where *is* Marisol? Didn’t she follow Oz through as well?” She looked across at Raleigh. “You said it would bring both of the Beruna cousins!”

“It will have brought both of them,” Raleigh replied slowly. “I’m absolutely positive. I don’t know why Marisol isn’t here.”

“She wasn’t with me,” Jake said slowly. “She was in Bolivia. I was in Australia.”

“But . . .” Raleigh and Amelia exchanged a look that was even grimmer than the last. “But we called her,” Amelia said.

A cold shock went through Jake, as if he’d been plunged back into the water, where the unicorn float was now spinning off into the harbor. Its rainbow horn swept over empty stretches of water—around and around.

He felt dizzy watching it.

He felt sick.

If Marisol had been pulled into the World Between Blinks from Bolivia but she hadn’t landed here . . . then she could have landed anywhere in this endless, ever-changing world.

How would they even begin to find his cousin?

And what might happen to her before they did?