

At that moment the youngest boy drew level with them and in that second his jaw dropped in time to his eyes widening like a rabbit staring into headlights. Usually Tony would have ignored this; Jimmy would probably be overwhelmed by a peanut butter *and* jelly sandwich. It was when Eve copied Jimmy's look, her focus shifting to something over Tony's head, that he started to consider being concerned. The smart thing to do would be to slowly turn around to see what was there, to see the pink blob drooping down from a branch with the consistency of syrup, gradually dripping onto his shoulder.

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Noah still couldn't see where this thing was. Being hopeful wasn't something he could allow, but Philip's exclamation had no evidence to validate it as of yet. Oh he had to stop thinking such things.

From their left, originating in the shadows of the conifers, the pink blob flung itself in front of them. Noah immediately pulled on the brakes, skidding to a halt before the creature, splattering its front with countless specks of mud and dust. The blob amassed itself, pulling in all of its trailing gelatinous appendages and rising as high as it could, finally towering at a height of eight feet. The Mancynns jumped off the bike and stood to face their adversary. Philip made to step forwards, but Noah threw out an arm before his chest, preventing him from moving any further.

Having made the desired first impression, the creature shrank slightly, meeting them at eye level with the large speckled eyeball that pushed its way to the surface to the jelly-like form. With their eyes locked, something which could have only been called a mouth opened, the pink surface tearing apart, half-formed teeth shapes bared at the newcomers.

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Tony, Eve and Jimmy backed away from the monster as gravity pulled the hanging pink drop from its vantage point onto the mud path. Having splattered on impact, it reassembled with disgusting squelching sounds before them. On opposite sides of the path all parties present rose to maximum height (which included pulling Cary to her feet) and stared unwaveringly at each other across the short distance of no man's land. Since the youths showed no sign of extending the hand of friendship, a thin tendril protruded from the creature's skin, slightly resembling an arm. Once more the kids before it remained close together.

"I can see your friends. They are safe with me," it gargled in what was an attempt at mimicking the local accent.

"What do you mean you can see them?" Eve asked tentatively, only a fraction of her tempted to react humorously to the nature of the voice itself.

The creature made an audacious step...undulation...forward, "I can tell that you are not like those who have come here before you..."

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"...and I can also tell that at least one of your friends knows what I am," it continued, its gaze flicking between Noah and Philip's faces.

“Would you do us the courtesy of not using telepathy?” Noah requested, purposefully kind.

Philip on the other hand couldn't help but gawp at the flecks of mud being absorbed into the rippling form, meaning he had no comment to contribute.

It took no notice of them, “He is hiding what he knows about me from you...”

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“...and yet you still trust the boy.”

This was creeping Tony out, especially the inconsistent nature of the creature's form, in conjunction with the squelching sound of the appendage being retracted. It seemed to notice his recoiling and so eyed him shrewdly.

Without moving its gaze it added as an afterthought, “But I sense that he is at least in some way against my old masters, and as I've heard people say: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Therefore I welcome you openly into my home. All of you.”

Once more it offered a sort of hand to the group, even inching forward like a gastropod, one foot pulling it slowly on. Its attempt at a face cracked into a warm smile, one with no hint of a hidden threat, and perhaps it was this apparent innocence that led Jimmy to be the first to step forth and allow himself to be welcomed by it.

With one human on its side, the creature looked expectantly towards the others, before realising, “Another of you is injured. Please, let me help.”

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As the Mancynns hopped onto the bike the creature informed them, “I will take you all to the clearing I frequent. There we can all speak properly.”

“Lead the way,” Noah proffered the path ahead with his arm.

Gladly the creature collapsed its form, tumbling into globules on the floor and reassembled as some four-legged animal which scampered up the path, guiding the bike and its riders to the aforementioned destination.

Their journey was slower than when they had been speeding along the highways, but the pink animal could only move so fast in this form. As they rounded a gentle corner, moving away from South Fork Flathead River, Philip caught sight of another pink blob moving swiftly towards them along a thinner path through the trees, and in its midst, getting ever closer, were their companions. This other pink form was not in the shape of a running animal, more instead that of a slug, or maybe it was a trail of thick liquid. Whichever it was, Tony, Cary, Eve and Jimmy were all waist-deep in the gelatinous mass, bobbing up and down as it wriggled between the trees. None of them looked comfortable.

“Nice of you to join us!” Noah called over to them, revelling in their discomfort.

He only received various looks of annoyance in return, but as the slug-like creature pulled up alongside the other and they merged messily into one larger pink being Noah didn't really care. He continued to drive his stolen bike behind their guide, the only

difference now being that there were four heads moving up and down in front of him at eye level.

If you ignored the groans of pain coming from those being carried ahead, the trek through the forest was silent. Now that their ascent was gradual and the smell of the nature around them was filling their nostrils, their way was a peaceful one. There was no talking to the creature, so anybody who didn't already know was none the wiser as to what it was, and Noah wasn't giving any hints either. They could guess, but what animal could they possibly liken it to? Even Philip, with all Noah had told him about the war they were fighting in, was clueless.

It was some time later (although the sun was still visible so it could not have been an excessive duration) that their guide finally brought them out into a clearing, one lined with rocks and surrounded by the dense woods. The earthy path had run out back down the mountainside; the last leg of their journey had been over wild country with insect-ridden foliage under foot and wheel. As the band of explorers were led into the clearing, many of them noticed the small pink critters crawling over the sandy-brown rocks, flitting in and out of sight, though the sounds they made never went unheard. Noah and Philip hopped off the bike where the creature deposited the other adolescents, the pair removing their helmets like the rest already had back at their previous location. They stood in a circle at the heart of the clearing, Cary standing gingerly upon her injured leg, although it did look like she was acting as though the pain was worse than it really was by this point, meanwhile the creature retreated to the rocks where the other alien lifeforms were congregating.