

Down The Hallway

“No!” I shouted, shooting upright in my bed. A dream, it was just a dream. Images came rushing back to me; a dark hallway, hands grasping at my arms, my legs, trying to stop me from opening the door that was in front of me. I shook my head frantically, remembering the fear I had felt as I had walked deeper into the hallway, and the joy I had felt as I had grasped the door handle and opened it. My dreams were not usually this vivid; it frightened me to be able to recall so much detail, and I wondered why this dream was so different from the others.

There was one image in particular that kept invading my consciousness: a young boy, around my age, imprisoned in a cage. But after that, the scariest part of my dream took over. The boy was covered by a thick, heaving mass of darkness. He screamed, and a huge wall of black sludge leapt out of the darkness, straight at me, as I backed up towards the door that lead out to the dank hallway and the grasping hands.

It was at that point that I had woken up, shivering and covered with sweat.

I shakily got out of bed, running a hand through my tangled hair. I stumbled into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, waking me up completely. I studied my reflection in the mirror as I tried to remember if I had seen the boy in my dreams before. I put all of my concentration in finding out who the mystery guy in my dream had been. He was familiar, that much I could tell. I had instantly known who it was in the dream, but as soon as the darkness had enveloped the boy, I had forgotten. I frowned, and the girl in the mirror did the same, her nose crinkling and her eyebrows furrowing in a way that reminded me of a pug. I laughed, my worries forgotten for the moment, as I looked out the bathroom window and saw the sun shining and the dreaded rain gone.

Living in California would seem like fun, with Disneyland and Hollywood in your back yard, but living in northern California was like living in a cloud. It was always raining. All of the trees were covered in green moss, and I was surprised that the people living here hadn’t grown flippers. For the sun to be out was practically a miracle, and I decided to forget the dream and continue with my life.

I rushed downstairs into the kitchen, drawn by the irresistible smell of bacon, pancakes and syrup. My older brother was at the stove, humming to himself as he expertly flipped a pancake, and slid a plate filled high with crispy bacon towards me.

“Sleep well, sis? Did my amazing cooking wake you?”

I laughed. "You wish. Although, this does smell good..." I bit into a bacon strip, and a multitude of flavors attacked my mouth. "Wow, Dylan, this is good!" Dylan laughed. He took a plate down from the cupboards above his head and put two pancakes on it. Then, he took out the bottle of syrup and drizzled what looked like half the bottle onto the fluffy goodness.

As I slowly ate my pancakes, the dream invaded my mind again. I could no longer remember what the boy looked like, or where he was. Why was I looking for him? Who was I looking for? Trying to remember was like trying to keep water in a sieve. The dream was slipping away, and I was relieved. It was a really scary dream, and I was glad to be rid of it.

"I've got to run, Echo. Do you want to go anywhere? Marissa called earlier while you were still asleep. She said she wanted to do something this weekend. Something about an English project...?" I looked up from the disappearing pancakes.

"An English project? We don't even have English together, and Mr. Jenkins doesn't assign projects, unless it's the end of the semester. Alright, can you drop me off at her house before you go to school? I have a feeling she wants to talk about something other than English."

Dylan laughed, as he flipped another pancake. "Well, go get dressed and then we can go."

I ran back up the stairs. After throwing on the nearest things I could find, I went in the bathroom. I ran a brush through my hair, and smeared some lip-gloss on. I flew down to the living room, where Dylan was shrugging on a coat.

I went out the front door and hopped in Dylan's car, a shiny white Prius. Dylan opened the driver's door and turned the car on. "Marissa's house, here we come!" He said, pulling away from our house.

As Dylan drove up to Marissa's driveway, a shriek of happiness pierced the morning.

"Echo! Hey, Echo, over here!" Marissa was standing on her front porch, waving her arms like a crazy person. I ran up the steps, falling into her embrace.

"Marissa, what's wrong? Why did you tell my brother that we had an English project to do? It must be pretty bad if you had to lie to him." Marissa's bottom lip started shaking, her carefree smile melting away.

"Oh, it's horrible!" She wailed, "I can't take it, Echo, we have to do something!"

"What?" I was confused. Marissa was usually very composed, but now she looked like a mess. She stopped crying and looked at me in disbelief.

“Jake’s in trouble. You know, Jake Dawson?” Her words brought the dream of last night back into my mind. The boy in the cage looked exactly like Jake, from his dirty blonde hair in a Bieber haircut, to his tall, well-built frame. But, how did Marissa know he was in trouble? Unless... Her tears back in full force, Marissa continued, “I had a really scary dream about Jake. He was in this room at the end of a hallway, in a cage. And then-“

“And then this darkness came over him, and this huge cloud of evil leapt out of the darkness, straight for you,” I finished, as Marissa looked at me in surprise.

“Well, yes, that’s exactly what happened. How did you know?” She looked as apprehensive as I felt. If the dream was real, though, we could have a chance to rescue Jake.

“Because, Marissa, I had the exact same dream last night,” I said. I grabbed Marissa’s hand and pulled her into her house. We headed for her room.

“Echo, you know how I write stuff down after a dream so I can remember it?” Marissa asked, as we walked into her room. “I drew the hallway and Jake in that cage. Then there’s this other scribble, that’s like a compass. It’s pointing at a forest that looks familiar. I think there’s an underground passageway in the forest in your backyard!”

“Marissa, you can’t be serious. I’ve been in that forest thousands of times. There is no way that a secret passage is hiding under the trees.” The forest in my backyard was huge, stretching all the way to the Plumas National Forest. It was Saturday, and school started again in two days. It would take forever to comb the forest, looking for a passageway that might not even exist.

Marissa showed me her drawing of the compass and the trees. One tree in particular stood out. It was a small tree, bent about halfway up, making an almost complete right angle. Its leaves created a canopy, shielding the ground from the sun.

“That’s our tree!” Marissa said gleefully. “Where we hang out after school all the time. There must be something there.”

I was still doubtful. “Marissa, how can we be sure? You might have doodled on the paper before you went to bed. It may be a coincidence.” Marissa shook her head stubbornly.

“It’s something. Come on, we can use my car. Jake needs us, Echo. There’s got to be a reason why we both had this dream. I’m going, and you can’t stop me.”

I sighed. “Fine. I’m in.”

Once Marissa and I entered the forest, a hush fell over both of us. It was so peaceful,

neither of us wanted to disturb the silence. We made our way over to the tree with the right angle in it. As I examined the tree itself, Marissa searched around the ground. We both came up short. No secret passage, no mysterious writing. Marissa slumped against the tree trunk, dejected. Her back hit a hidden button I hadn't seen, and the top half of the tree fell off. Marissa and I stepped back in shock.

Where our favorite tree used to be, a dark, gaping hole stood in its place. Marissa looked at me, apprehension etched onto her face.

"Well," I muttered, "here goes nothing..." I managed to hoist myself into the hole, Marissa trailing after me like a lost puppy. I dropped down, bending my knees at the last moment, like Dylan had taught me to. The hallway was longer than I had expected, but it was the only way to go. I helped Marissa down, and we both looked into the tunnel that lay before us.

"Okay, I can see a torch about twenty feet away," Marissa whispered. "According to the dream, we should walk about two hundred feet before the torches stop and the hands start reaching out and grasping us." I looked at her in surprise. She shrugged. "I'm good at distance, okay? I was counting my steps in the dream and I figured it out from there." I shook my head, smiling, as we started walking down the hallway.

It was dark and damp underground, and I began to worry. What if we weren't able to get back up from the tree? What if the darkness that had consumed Jake got to us? There were so many "what if" questions. I shook myself. Marissa and I were no use to Jake if we were scared to death. We had to be brave. I suddenly giggled, and Marissa looked at me like I was crazy.

"What is wrong with you? We are in a cave, deep underground, walking through a tunnel to a guy who's trapped in a steel cage, and you're laughing?"

"It's just so funny. It's like a backwards fairy tale. Instead of the guy rescuing us, we're rescuing the guy!" I started laughing again, while Marissa kept looking at me like I was psycho.

"I think the fear has gotten to your brain." I looked at her, and we both started laughing, until the torches stopped and something pinched us.

All of a sudden, there were hands and fingers everywhere, grabbing our hair, pulling our clothes, and pinching our faces and arms. Marissa screamed, and in the dim light, I could see her swiping at them, trying to dislodge this new terror.

A raspy, dry voice called out, "Go away. You are not wanted here. Leave, or you become like us..." The pulling and pinching and grabbing intensified as we progressed down the long

corridor towards Jake. Marissa and I pushed and shoved our way through the tide, shaking off the hands, and a new sense of purpose rising up between us as a door entered our vision.

“We’re so close, Echo; I can feel it.” Marissa panted as she shook off another grasping limb. “If we can just make it to the door—“

“That darkness in the room will kill us. Face it Marissa, we can’t do this. It’s impossible,” I said bleakly. All of my resolve was gone. Why were we here? Two tenth graders couldn’t rescue someone from a force this strong. It had haunted our dreams, baiting us in so we could be its next victims. A hand grabbed me, and I swatted at it. Marissa let out a yelp of pain.

“Hey, that’s my arm! Listen, Echo, we’ve gone so far now, and we can’t give up. We will do our best, and we will save Jake. Come on, we’re almost there.” She jogged ahead of me, forcing me to follow.

Marissa and I reached the door at the same time. We stared at it, and slowly inched the door open. The room was spacious and dark. The only furniture was what looked like a huge birdcage in the middle of the floor. A hunched figure was inside it, making a scratching sound with what looked like his fingers. Marissa crept forward silently, with me just behind her. The figure turned around, and a gaunt, scarred Jake Dawson looked out through haunted eyes.

“Marissa...Echo? What are you doing here? Never mind,” he said, looking frantically left and right. “Just get out of here, please. And tell whoever is sending all of my friends here to stop it. They’ve all...” He trailed off, tears clouding his blue eyes. I looked around, and saw, to my horror, bones scattered around the corners of the room.

“Don’t worry, Jake. We’ll get you out of there.” Marissa said fiercely, rushing towards the cage.

“No!” Jake shouted, as a cloud of darkness rose up behind him. With a roar, it rushed past him, coating him in a black sludge, freezing him in place, his right arm reaching out to us. I managed to pull Marissa away, far enough that the black cloud couldn’t reach her. I searched frantically around, trying to find a weapon. But what can you use to defend yourself against a dark cloud? I picked up a rib and threw it at the dark mass. It sailed right through, almost hitting an immobile Jake in the head. Marissa screamed.

“That thing is unstoppable! You were right, Echo; we’re going to die!” I gritted my teeth. Hearing Marissa say what I had thought minutes earlier somehow strengthened my resolve. We weren’t going down without a fight.

This thing must have a weakness; everything, even “unstoppable” dark clouds, had a weak point. My job now was to find out where. Someone or something must be controlling this darkness, making it move and function. It should be... there, in the middle of the heaving black. I saw a speck of white, no bigger than a baseball.

I picked up the nearest thing slowly – gross, a skull – and chucked it with all of my might, timing it perfectly. The skull sailed through the air, striking the white spot, and making the cloud of darkness cry out in pain.

“Echo, how did you do that?” Marissa asked in amazement. The cloud spun around, focused on her voice. It dove down to Marissa, intent on catching its prey.

“Echo!” she screamed, and, without thinking, I threw a femur with all of my strength. Just as the cloud reached my best friend, the bone reached the cloud. It screeched, and a white light enveloped it. Marissa and I shielded our eyes. When the light had disappeared, we looked up to find the black sludge that had covered Jake gone, as well as the cloud. Jake, free of the immobilizing darkness, slumped against one of the cell bars. Marissa rushed over to him.

“Jake! Are you ok? Jake... Jake?” She looked at me, fear in her eyes. “Echo... he needs help.”

At the hospital, Marissa and I watched Jake slowly breathing as he lay on the bed, his heart beating out a steady pulse. We had dragged him out of the tunnel, free of the grasping hands, where a worried Dylan had met us. He had gone to Marissa’s house to talk to me, and, finding the house empty, went into the forest, to our tree. Seeing the hole, he had obviously freaked out, but had waited faithfully for us to reappear. When Dylan saw Jake, he had immediately driven us to the hospital. I was certain Dylan was going to be mad at us, but so far I hadn’t gotten a lecture.

“Good news, guys,” Dylan said, as he walked up to us in the hospital room. “The docs say Jake just got a concussion. He’ll have to stay in the hospital for three more days, but should be back in school by Tuesday.”

Marissa and I shared a knowing look. It was much more than just a concussion, but we weren’t saying anything. I looked back at Jake, and then took Marissa’s hand. Together, we turned and walked out of the room, down the hallway once again.