

ATOMIC FRINGE

ORION FRIDAY



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"It's our time down here."

—Mikey, *The Goonies*

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Chapter One

First Contact

Mr. Marten's heart raced as he stumbled through the forest. He had already fallen multiple times and would certainly fall again. The few slivers of moonlight slipping through the trees were no match for the pitch darkness. He scolded himself for dropping his phone, which he had been using as a flashlight, but the shock of what he had seen had been too great. The size of the thing. Those eyes. That horrible clicking sound. It echoed through the forest, shaking Mr. Marten's bones down to their very atoms.

If he could just make it back to his campsite, he'd feel safe. He had spared no expense in buying every available rugged upgrade for his RV. It was practically a tank, sporting big knobby tires, four-wheel drive, and an impressive surround sound entertainment system. Once inside, Mr. Marten would fire up the powerful engine and drive away. Straight through the nearby town of Willow Hollow and

on to Portland. Once there, he would sell his RV and buy a plane ticket to an even bigger city. One nowhere near wilderness. The fewer trees, the better. He was officially done with the outdoors.

Mr. Marten calmed when he spotted glistening metal. It was a blue fold-up chair. His chair. He'd been sitting in that very chair when he first saw the fiery object rip through the night sky. Assuming it had been a meteorite, he had eagerly rushed out to find the crash site—a decision he deeply regretted.

Spotting his blue chair offered relief, but it only took a few moments to realize there was something else missing. Something much more important.

Where was his RV?

It should have been waiting for him right by the stream. It was gone. It made no sense.

Rustling startled Mr. Marten. He spun toward the sound, seeing only the faint outline of hemlock trees. The rustling grew, giving way to loud cracks as the strong hemlock trunks snapped like twigs. Terror froze Mr. Marten's muscles. He had nowhere else to run, no place to hide.

Then something hurtled out from the darkness. Mr. Marten dove for cover as a massive object sailed over him, crashing to the ground with a crunch of heavy metal. It took a moment for Mr. Marten to realize what it was.

There, in a heap of mangled metal, was a tire. A knobby off-road tire.

His powerful RV had been crushed and tossed across the campsite like a soda can. Then came the clicking sound. Slow and low. It seemed to suck the air away.

Mr. Marten cried for help, but there was no one around to hear him.

Chapter Two

Auntie Matter

Music thumped as laser lights danced through mist pouring from a fog machine. The scene played out just like the player announcements at a basketball game, only it wasn't a basketball player that ran onto the floor. Instead, a boxy robot motored through the fog like a gladiator ready for battle.

Imitating a sports announcer, a kid's voice echoed through the speaker: "Ladies and gentlemen, behold the next evolution in robotics. Coming to you straight from the sick and twisted minds of the Eureka Middle School Robotics Club. The Steph Curry of robots. The one, the only—*Kato!*"

Holding a karaoke machine microphone, Nova flashed a rock star sneer after finishing her announcement. With her punk-styled dark hair and purple-rimmed glasses, she nearly pulled it off. Nearly.

The theatrics were a little extra. They were in Mattie's garage, where their robot, named after robotics engineer Ichiro Kato, had never come close to making a basket. And they were using a kid-size hoop, not the regulation basketball goal that would be used in their upcoming robotics competition. Which was why they had spent an entire Sunday eating cheeseballs and drinking overly caffeinated sodas while desperately trying to get the programming fixed.

Overkill or not, goose bumps tickled over Mattie's arms as Kato's firing mechanism powered up to a high-pitched whir. With a loud thunk, a bright-orange basketball shot out of the large tube mounted on Kato's squat frame, rocketing across the garage before narrowly missing the backboard.

Even if it had been on target, the ball traveled way too fast. It slammed into the wall, shooting back across the garage. Mattie and Nova dove for cover as the ball bounced back and forth, creating utter chaos. Bikes were knocked over. A rack of neatly organized tools crashed to the floor. The family-size can of cheeseballs burst like a piñata, raining orange-dusted corn puffs everywhere.

After smashing the karaoke machine Mattie had just gotten for her eleventh birthday, the ball shot upward, nearly touching the ceiling, before gently floating down

toward the basket. Mattie's and Nova's mouths dropped open in near-perfect synchronization.

It was going to go in!

The ball hit the rim, rolling around and around . . . before it dribbled lamely off the side.

"I'm calling that progress!" Nova said, even as they lay on the floor with orange cheese dust raining down on them. "It's never even hit the rim before."

Mattie managed a wry smile while brushing cheeseballs out of her hair. Nova's optimism didn't change reality. Kato was a malfunctioning mess.

As the robotics club engineer, Nova had designed and built a robot that could shoot a basketball. Judging by the power it had just displayed, Kato could probably shoot one halfway across town.

The truth was that Mattie's programming didn't work. "Maybe you should get someone else to write the code."

"Who?" Nova asked. "You're the only club member who can write code."

Nova left out the fact that they were the *only* two club members.

Mattie did have some code training, though. For two straight summers, she'd attended Fusion Coding Summer Camp, which was exactly what the name suggested: a summer camp for computer programming. But her interests

mostly involved modding video games—going into game code and modifying it so that instead of a character using a bazooka to blow away other characters, they could use whatever Mattie desired. Like a giant churro that shot lime-green snot balls.

Unfortunately, programming Kato to shoot basketballs had proven a bigger challenge than modding snot-shooting churros.

“There’s no way I could have built Kato without you,” Nova said. “Sure, it’s ugly and has terrible aim. And it’s more than just a little dangerous—but you got this, Matts. It’s going to work.”

Nova Diaz’s endless supply of optimism might have been annoying to anyone who didn’t get to know her. Unfortunately, that included most students at Eureka Middle. But Mattie did know her. And she knew there was never anything fake about her best friend.

“Okay,” Mattie said. “But I’m not doing any more tonight. I’m sick of looking at code. Besides, Auntie Taj is going to freak when she sees this mess.”

Mentioning Auntie Taj’s name triggered something important.

“Where’s Chucky?”

Chucky was Auntie Taj’s French bulldog. They had both traveled from Los Angeles to Willow Hollow, Ore-

gon, to watch over Mattie while her parents were on vacation. Mattie was annoyed she couldn't go with her parents, but spending a week with Auntie Taj was a solid trade-off. Auntie Taj was a 3D animator who actually made video games as a job. Auntie Taj was a proud Blerd. She went to Comic-Con every year. She cosplayed. She knew more about anime than Mattie and Nova combined. And it didn't hurt that she allowed Mattie to stay up late and eat whatever she wanted.

But their week together—Auntie Taj had named it “Slaycation Domination”—wouldn't start out well if Chucky ran away.

“Don't worry. He's too lazy to get far.”

Nova was right about Chucky's laziness. The dog whined whenever Auntie Taj refused to carry him around. Which was why they'd felt comfortable opening the garage door to let in air. But apparently Kato's rampage was enough to send Chucky running.

They split up to search; Nova took the front yard, and Mattie went around back. It only took moments to spot the little monster. He'd set off the motion sensor and light washed over the entire backyard. Panting heavily, Chucky stood at the edge of the woods that began where the yard ended.

Relieved, Mattie strode toward him. There was no way Chucky, a dog that expected to be fed by hand, would run into the woods. “Come on, Chucky. Let’s go find Auntie Taj. She’ll have treats.”

Chucky’s nubby tail shimmied. He liked his treats.

But then the laziest dog ever did the unthinkable: he took off like a big-headed rocket, beelining straight into the woods.

“Nooooo!”

Mattie knew the woods behind her house like the back of her hand. So chasing an overweight Frenchie wasn’t a huge problem. Even at night. The woods behind Mattie’s house were the kiddie-pool version of woods. The problem was that if one continued far enough, they would reach Sycamore Road. On the other side of Sycamore Road lay Bellewood Canyon—the deep-end version of woods. And that was exactly the direction Chucky was heading.

After effortlessly dodging through trees, Mattie slid down a small embankment and found herself at the edge of Sycamore Road. There were no cars. That was a relief. But there was also no sign of Chucky.

Across the road, thick mist lurked inside the much more menacing woods that extended down into the depths of Bellewood Canyon. It was like standing at the edge of

a forbidden forest. As if on cue, an owl hooted, causing Mattie to jump. She dreaded the idea of going into Bellewood Canyon, but the thought of Chucky getting attacked by an owl was no comfort either.

Mattie realized that waiting would only make it harder to find Chucky. She had to go into the canyon and get him. Just as she crossed Sycamore Road, though, her attention snapped overhead, where something moved through the night sky. Obscured by heavy mist, Mattie couldn't make out what it was, but it had to be some large aircraft. Yet there was no sound. She should have been scared, but she was entranced by it.

As the strange disturbance continued flying out over the canyon, Mattie momentarily lost track of it until a small pyramid-shaped object dropped down through the mist. It glowed slightly purple before disappearing into the depths of Bellewood Canyon.

Mattie's heart raced. She didn't know what she had seen, but she knew it wasn't normal. Suddenly, she didn't want to be standing alone anywhere near Bellewood Canyon. In a blur, she sprinted back up the short hillside, through the kiddie-pool woods, and into her backyard, where she nearly ran over Nova.

"I found Chucky!" Nova said, holding the squirming French bulldog.

“We need to get inside!”

Nova’s pride melted into concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I just saw something really weird—”

Mattie stopped speaking when she spotted a shadow stretching ominously along the side of the house. It couldn’t be a human shadow. The head was large and oddly shaped, like a giant mushroom.

As the shadow moved closer, the motion sensor triggered, and lights washed over the backyard. Mattie and Nova screamed the moment they saw the purple figure that emerged from the shadows.

But they realized their screams were mixed with . . .
Auntie Taj’s screams?

“Why in the *heck* are we screaming?” Auntie Taj said loudly, using a different word than *heck*. She was wearing purple silk pajamas with a matching hair bonnet, which explained the mushroom-shaped shadow. “Now, what in the *heck* is going on?” No doubt Auntie Taj said *heck* that time to make up for the earlier slip. “And why is Chucky out of breath?”

Mattie calmed herself before explaining. Talking about flying objects was a delicate matter. Especially with someone like Auntie Taj, who generally didn’t have patience for things she considered nonsense.

After Mattie finished providing a detailed, strictly factual account of what she'd seen, Auntie Taj didn't say a word for what seemed like a long while. Her green-plastered face gave away nothing as to what she was thinking. Then, very calmly and deliberately, Auntie Taj walked over to the outdoor bar under the back deck. She picked out a wineglass. Not just any wineglass—the ridiculously over-size wineglass Mattie's mother had received as a gift from work friends. Auntie Taj then unlocked the wine cooler and selected a bottle. She uncorked it and filled the massive glass to the very brim.

“Did you take a video?” Auntie Taj finally asked.

The question hit Mattie like Kato had shot her with a basketball. She'd had her phone with her the entire time. She should have recorded what she'd seen.

Auntie Taj had little trouble reading Mattie's thoughts. “You know what sounds crazier than seeing a UFO?” Mattie cringed at the *UFO* mention. “An eleven-year-old who saw a UFO but didn't record it.”

“She has a point,” Nova said. “Our kind usually records anything remotely interesting.”

“Okay, we'll go back down there so you can see it live,” Mattie said. “The old-fashioned in-person live.”

Auntie Taj stared into her deep-purple wine like it was a fortune teller's crystal ball. "What kind of games do I make?"

The question caught Mattie off guard, but it was also confusing because Auntie Taj had worked on lots of games in different genres: RPGs, MMORPGs, FPS.

"Good games," Nova said, sporting a big grin.

"Thank you, Nova. Right as rain, as usual. And you know what makes a good game?" This time she didn't wait for an answer. "Consequences. If you do something stupid in a game, there must be consequences. For example, walking into some creepy woods at night looking for aliens is pretty stupid. There will be consequences."

"I never said anything about aliens," Mattie said. "I don't know what I saw. It was probably totally explainable."

Auntie Taj sighed deeply, clicking her fingernails on the counter. "Maybe I've seen too many horror movies, but that's what this is starting to feel like. And you know who usually dies first in horror movies? Black and Brown people like us. We don't even have to do anything stupid."

Nova slowly raised her hand like she was in Mrs. Adebayo's computer class. "I feel like that movie cliché is changing." Auntie Taj gave a wicked side eye, and Nova

lowered her arm just as slowly as she'd raised it. "There's still a long way to go."

Auntie Taj swirled her wine. It seemed she was about to explain a few things. Or maybe she was just getting ready to take a drink. Whatever was about to happen, however, was suddenly interrupted.

"Look!" Nova shouted, causing Auntie Taj to spill wine on her silk pajamas.

Something cruised through the mist overhead. Mattie felt vindicated. "I told you it was real!"

"I think we should go inside," Auntie Taj said, her voice saturated with anxiety as she wrangled Chucky into her arms while sloshing wine everywhere.

There was something different this time, though. Whatever flew through the mist was smaller. Much smaller. And it was making noise.

"Do you hear that?" Mattie asked, referring to a faint buzzing that was getting louder.

"Sounds like a dro—" Nova wasn't able to finish her sentence because a bright-red drone blasted through the mist, heading directly at them.

"What the . . . ?" Auntie Taj screamed as she ushered Mattie and Nova inside the house. They shut the sliding glass door mere seconds before the plastic drone crashed into it, falling harmlessly to the ground.

“Somebody’s about to die,” Auntie Taj said.

Parker Wu trembled. The boy literally shook in his Nikes as he struggled to maintain eye contact with Auntie Taj. It surely didn’t help that her face was avocado green, but it was mostly the menace in her eyes that set him on edge. Mattie and Nova couldn’t help feeling bad for him.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am. I don’t know what happened.” Even his voice trembled.

“Oh, I know exactly what happened. That’s no longer the issue. The question now is, what’s going to happen?”

His trembling worsened. “Please don’t tell my Gran. Please. She’ll take my drone away.”

“Maybe she ought to. You need some flying lessons.”

Parker winced at the pride-stinging comment. He was, after all, wearing a T-shirt that read “All About That Drone Life”.

Neither Mattie nor Nova knew all that much about Parker. He was new to Eureka Middle School, and he’d mostly kept to himself. This was the most interaction they’d had with him.

“You live with your grandmother?” Auntie Taj asked.

Parker nodded sheepishly. “Just around the corner. I’m really sorry, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

Auntie Taj sighed, handing over his drone. “You’re lucky you didn’t break a window, young man.”

Nova went home shortly after Auntie Taj let Parker off the hook, and the first night of Slaycation Domination finally began. First, they ordered ramen. Midway through slurping down their tonkotsu, they ordered chocolate-peanut butter pie from a local bakery. After that, Auntie Taj insisted they stay up and binge-watch *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Due to the fact that her parents wouldn’t allow it, Mattie had never seen it.

“There are fifty-one episodes,” Auntie Taj said. “We gotta get crackin’ if we’re going to finish in a week.”

Only minutes into the second episode, however, Auntie Taj and Chucky were both asleep. It was hard to tell which one snored louder.

Mattie, on the other hand, had trouble sleeping that night. It didn’t help that the anime was wildly addicting. Neither did all the junk food and caffeine. But there was something else keeping her awake.

She couldn’t explain what she had seen flying over Bellewood Canyon, but she knew with absolute certainty that it hadn’t been Parker’s drone.

Chapter Three

Project Greysheet

Dr. Webb's shoes clicked against polished marble as she purposefully strode down an impossibly long hallway. She disliked visiting the Pentagon, but she knew they hated seeing her even more.

"It's always good to see you, Dr. Webb," General Gorham said, barely selling the lie as he waited for her outside his office.

Gorham's assistant avoided looking at them when they entered, but Dr. Webb caught a curious glance from the young man. It had to be strange seeing his boss, a decorated war hero, nervously waiting for a visitor.

Once inside Gorham's office, which featured photos of the general posing with presidents and other world leaders, he locked the door and typed commands into a security terminal.

"It's jamming tech. Keeps what we say in here just between us." The proud general scoffed at his own explana-

tion. “But why am I telling you? You would understand how it works better than almost anyone, I suppose. It’s just a bunch of black magic to an old combat grunt like me.”

Dr. Webb didn’t bother faking a smile. “I need a full tactical-response team.”

Gorham nearly choked. “Not going to happen. We need more proof.”

“I’m not asking to deploy just yet.” She was prepared for his stonewalling. “I just need you to get everything ready to go in case we make contact.”

Gorham braced himself against the wall as if he might fall down. “Regardless of what you might think, Dr. Webb, I actually respect what you and Project Greysheet do. And I realize this stuff is way outside of my universe—pun intended—but why all the urgency? I looked at the report, and this seems no different than the hundreds of other harmless space rocks that enter our atmosphere every day.”

“Normal space rocks burn up as they pass through our atmosphere. Most completely disintegrate and never hit Earth. The readings show that the object we’ve named A17 didn’t lose any mass; it actually got bigger. What we know about physics says that is impossible.”

Gorham wiped his brow with a tissue before sinking into a visitor’s chair, too bothered to walk over to his own.

He sat for a moment, fiddling around with a model fighter jet sitting on his desk. "I still don't see how this warrants prepping a full response team. Even if we don't deploy, it's a huge undertaking."

"There's more," Dr. Webb said in an ominous tone. She handed General Gorham a tablet that displayed a computer animation of a space rock on course for Earth. "That's A17. We tracked its course from deep space. It came in on a perfectly normal trajectory and speed. Just like a perfectly normal space rock. Which is why we didn't know there was anything unusual about it until after it entered the atmosphere."

"That's when it got bigger when it was supposed to get smaller," Gorham said, scratching his chin as he watched the video.

Dr. Webb reached down and toggled the tablet to a different animation. "Roughly two hours after A17 arrived, this happened." The animation showed a second object's movements. "Something larger appeared here. This second object then sped up before veering toward Earth's surface."

Gorham looked ill. "Why is this one so short?"

"We only tracked it for approximately a minute, and then it disappeared. What we did track is alarming because it changed direction and speed. And we're talking incred-

ible speed. Which means it was no space rock. Something controlled it.”

“But you said it disappeared.” Gorham massaged his temples “How can we track it one minute and not the next? Some sort of cloaking device or something?”

There it was. *Cloaking device*. She’d just known he was going to say it. “I can’t speculate on hypothetical technologies,” Dr. Webb said. She took her job seriously and hated it when people resorted to science fiction terminology. “But the more important issue is that we analyzed the course it was on. It was heading toward the same location where A17 crashed. A heavily wooded area a few miles from an Oregon town called Willow Hollow. It appears the second object was on an intercept course to find A17.”

Gorham leaned back in his chair, nearly tipping over. “You know, Dr. Webb, you don’t seem all that concerned that we might be on the verge of getting a visit from little green men.”

“I have too many questions. What if they’re not little? What if they’re not green? And what if they’re not men?” Dr. Webb let that hit its mark before continuing. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment my whole life, General.”

For once, it was difficult to read the general, but whatever he was thinking, he seemed confident in his judgment.

“I will get the ball rolling, but I need more than code names and videos if we’re going to fully mobilize. I need one hundred percent proof.”

“I am personally going to check it out, General. If there’s proof, I will find it.”

Chapter Four

Serendipity

Eureka Middle School was only a ten-minute walk from Mattie's house, but Kato the malfunctioning basketball robot was school property and had to be returned to the computer lab. Which meant Mattie needed a ride. That proved to be an adventure. For one, Auntie Taj wasn't exactly a morning person. Then there was the mess waiting in the garage. In the previous night's excitement, Mattie had completely forgotten about it.

Surprisingly, Auntie Taj didn't utter a single curse. Not even a tame one. There was, however, a silent moment as she looked over the devastation Kato had caused. The silence ended when Mattie's foot crunched one of the many stale cheese balls covering the floor.

Proving she really was the coolest auntie ever, Auntie Taj simply said, "Guess we need more cheeseballs."

During the short drive, Mattie wanted to bring up what she had seen flying over Bellewood Canyon, but Auntie

Taj instead made the case for doing Mattie's hair. One of the few bad things about Slaycation Domination was the hair thing. "You can't go through your whole life with that boring Afro puff, Mattie. You gotta branch out. Black-girl hair is too awesome to be held in check like that."

Mattie cringed. She had once let her mother braid her hair. The pain had been epic.

Nova stood waiting for them when Auntie Taj pulled into the school drop-off zone. As they unloaded Kato from the car, Auntie Taj noticed Nova's T-shirt.

"Lower Me Higher," Auntie Taj said, reading the words that were styled like those found on a nineties grunge band shirt. "What's that about?"

"It's a band name," Nova said proudly.

"Never heard of 'em."

"You wouldn't have. It's not a real band. I made it up."

Auntie Taj's face scrunched like she was filtering out words she couldn't say near a middle school.

Nova tried to explain—more like, overexplain. "I think ironic band names are cool. So I make up my own. Then I design shirts for them. Like Custom Copies, Lackluster Gleaming, Calibrated Chaos, Indifferent Passion, Infinite Endings—"

“Yeah, I get it.” Auntie Taj said, stopping Nova before she listed off every single ironic band name she’d ever thought up.

“I hoped they would help me get noticed at school.”

“How’s that working out?”

“Not great. If people do notice, they just think I’m even weirder than they did before.”

Mattie knew her best friend well enough to know it did bother Nova that people didn’t appreciate her shirts. What amazed Mattie was that Nova seemed unwilling to let awkward stares or snickering stop her from making even more of them. Mattie mostly wore gray hoodies to avoid standing out—which was another reason she didn’t want Auntie Taj touching her hair. Brightly colored box braids would draw some attention.

“Their loss, Nova. Never stop being you!” Auntie Taj gave Nova a fist bump. “But just so you and Mattie know, you’re not off the hook for the garage. That Humpy-Dumpty better get put back together before Mattie’s parents get home. I’m not taking the blame for anything. Especially when I don’t get to participate in the fun.”

Mattie and Nova pushed Kato through the Eureka Middle main hallway, receiving more than a few curious stares. Basketball shooting robots were rarely spotted in the main hallway. Or anywhere for that matter.

Oddly enough, Mattie barely noticed the attention. Or how much Nova enjoyed it. Mattie's thoughts drifted back to the previous night. She couldn't stop thinking about what she had witnessed. Whatever had flown through the mist was big. Nothing that size could have flown so silently. And just as clearly as when it happened, Mattie could recall the pyramid-shaped object dropping down into Bellewood Canyon.

"Mattie!" Nova said loudly enough to snap Mattie back into the moment. "You're still not stressing about Kato's programming, are you?"

"No." Though Mattie realized if it wasn't for the mysterious pyramid-dropping incident clouding her thoughts, she definitely would be stressing over Kato's janky code. "I need to tell you something. It's kind of weird, and I don't really know how to explain it."

"What you saw last night wasn't a drone," Nova said without a hint of judgment. She pushed her purple-rimmed glasses higher; it's what she did any time she was about to drop some science. "I did some light research on drone controllers to see if Parker could have flown it all the way down to Bellewood Canyon. If he was using a five-gigahertz control board, it would provide faster data transmission, but if he was using two-point-four gigahertz—"

Mattie had to jump in before Nova went full Bill Nye and explained every aspect of drone-controller mechanics. “It definitely wasn’t Parker’s drone.”

“Right,” Nova said, cracking an embarrassed smile. “That’s what I was getting to. It had to be something else. So, we have a mystery.”

Mattie’s desire to discuss it further was quickly overwhelmed by a sudden concern. “Wait, you didn’t tell anyone else about this, did you? And by ‘anyone,’ you know who I mean.”

Nova’s pained reaction answered the question. “You know I suck at lying.”

“You didn’t have to lie. You just didn’t have to tell her.”

“I tried,” Nova said. “But you also know I suck at keeping secrets.” Nova twitched nervously. “I cracked. I’m sorry.”

Without warning, a classroom door opened, knocking Kato over.

Mattie and Nova both shouted, “Hey!”

Then they simultaneously groaned as they noticed a smartly dressed girl with the same auburn skin, brown eyes, and jet-black hair as Nova.

“You almost broke it,” Nova said.

“When I said you should make new friends, I didn’t mean that you should literally *make* a friend, baby sister.”

"You're only older by eleven minutes, Rora."

"Best eleven minutes of my life."

The Diaz twins were not identical. Nova wore glasses and was slightly taller, while Rora had a rounder face. Mattie occasionally found herself surprised at their similarities; having gotten to know their personalities so well, she sometimes wondered how they were actually related.

"Heard you saw a UFO last night," Rora said pointedly.

"*It wasn't a UFO!*" Mattie replied too loudly, getting more than a few stares from other students. Which made her sweat.

"Then what was it?"

Mattie stammered for a moment. "I don't know."

"Pretty sure 'I don't know' is just another way of saying *unidentified*. And was this object *flying*?"

"Stop making it weird," Nova said. "And for the record, the more appropriate terminology is UAP. Unidentified aerial phenomena."

"Talking like that is weird. *And for the record*," Rora mocked, "I actually think it's cool Mattie saw something. It would be even cooler if we could get a video of it."

Nova and Mattie glanced at each other, realizing exactly where Rora's true interests lay.

Like most schools, Eureka Middle had a defined social system, with the most popular kids at the top. While

Mattie and Nova were at the bottom of that popularity pyramid—barely noticed unless they did something embarrassing—Rora was a social unicorn. She wasn't defined by labels, nor was she confined to a clique or squad. She existed in an unexplained social realm where she was infinitely popular yet still able to hang out with anyone or any group without it affecting her social status. The populars, the jocks, the bullies, the skaters, the gamers, the loners, the geeks—they all adored Rora. And sometimes feared her.

But Rora had her sights set on a much bigger social platform.

"Do you even realize how many subscribers we could get if we had a video of a real-life UFO!" Rora stated it as fact even though she'd phrased it as a question. "Sorry—*UAP*."

"I don't want subscribers. Or likes. Or hearts," Mattie said. "I don't even have social accounts. Because, just like you, *I'm too young!*"

"There are ways around that," Rora said with a sneaky grin.

"I don't care. I just want to know what it was. That's it!"

"Me too," Rora said. "I'm totally in."

"In for what?" Mattie asked. She could literally feel her temperature rising.

"For teaming up to find out what you saw. Let's do this."

It was rare that Rora wanted to spend time with Mattie and Nova. She made it clear she didn't like robotics, science, books, anime, or any song that failed to crack the pop charts, which severely limited their common interests.

"No," Mattie said after getting over her surprise. "You just want a video so you can exploit it."

Rora shrugged as if there was nothing wrong with that. "Not accepting no for an answer."

There were times, such as this, in which Mattie wondered how Nova managed to live in the same house with Rora.

"It's going to take a *scientific* approach," Nova said. "The scientific method is not always exciting."

Mattie realized Nova was trying reverse psychology. She joined in. "There will also be a lot of math, Rora. Lots and lots and lots of math."

Rora was unfazed. "That's why we're going to make a great team. You two take care of all the boring stuff, and I'll do my thing." She flashed a sneaky smile without explaining what her thing actually was. "I gotta bounce, but we can vibe on this later."

As Rora strode away, Mattie turned to Nova. "This isn't happening. I'm not letting her talk her way into this. I'm not even sure what *this* is."

Nova offered a sympathetic smile.

“I’m serious, Nova. There’s no way I’m doing anything with her.”

“There’s no way we’re going down into Bellewood Canyon, Rora!” Mattie said. And this time, she meant it.

It took Rora less than two periods to wear Mattie down. By lunch, they were arguing over how they were going to collectively solve the UAP mystery. They huddled together at one end of the table where Mattie and Nova usually ate lunch—“the Loner Table,” as it was often referred to since it was where one ate lunch if they didn’t have many friends. Most people avoided it out of fear they would never make friends if they were seen sitting there. Even if the alternative was making friends with people they really didn’t like just so they could sit at a more popular table. It was, however, the perfect table to hold a private planning session on how to go about identifying flying objects.

“But you said that you saw the pyramid thingy drop down into the canyon,” Rora said. “Maybe it’s still down there. Let’s go find it.”

“As usual, you’re missing the point,” Nova said.

Mattie tried to make the point even more clear. “I saw something unexplained drop a glowing object down into

a canyon that was already super creepy. Do you really want to go down there?”

Rora’s face scrunched with frustration. “Okay, why don’t you two *science* us a way to see what’s down there without actually going down there?”

The first time Mattie read the word “serendipity”, she’d had to look it up. Upon doing so, she realized that a word could mean so much more than its definition. To Mattie, serendipity was a perfect word. Almost magical. It was a word she was reluctant to use unless the occasion really called for it. Sitting at the nearly empty table, listening to Rora mock science like it was some sort of cheat code anyone could activate, it seemed Mattie wouldn’t find use for the word. But then the shrill clang of hollow steel echoed throughout the cafeteria. Every head in the room swiveled toward the source.

Parker Wu, the boy who had crashed a drone into Mattie’s house, stood petrified as the entire Eureka Middle student body gawked at him. His lunchbox—an older metallic model with paint so faded it was impossible to tell if the superhero on the cover was Marvel or DC—had broken open, and all its contents had crashed to the floor. A heavy metal thermos, the source of the loud clang, rolled across the floor like a runaway puppy.

“The nineties called, and they want their lunchbox back,” Declan Cooper shouted from the Popular Table, where he and Tate Leland held court.

It didn’t matter that the joke had been lame. Declan said it. So, laughter erupted throughout the cafeteria, prompting even more jokes. Parker’s cheeks blushed cherry red as he fumbled about gathering up his lunch.

Mattie and Nova knew all too well what it was like being the target of Declan and Tate’s unoriginal jokes. They had the misfortune of sharing gym class with both of them. As Mattie empathized with Parker’s situation, something bumped into her foot. She looked down, and there was Parker’s thermos. It had rolled halfway across the cafeteria and come to a stop just below her chair. But it was the stickers on the thermos that sparked the idea. They were mostly related to drone-racing.

“*Serendipity!*” Mattie hadn’t meant to say it out loud. Nova and Rora both stared at her like she’d lost her mind. “I know how we can search Bellewood Canyon without actually going down there.”

“You want me to fly a drone into a canyon to look for aliens?” Parker asked.

After helping him gather up his lunch, they offered Parker a seat at what Rora had renamed the Awesome Table. Not exactly a clever name, but Rora's presence did offer some benefits. All the jokes and laughter at Parker's expense had stopped the moment everyone saw him with Rora Diaz. Even Declan and Tate had moved on. By the looks of it, they were making fart sounds with a ketchup bottle. And everyone around them found it hilarious.

"Nobody said anything about aliens," Mattie said, using her hands way too emphatically.

Parker looked even more confused. "But I thought you saw a UFO."

Mattie sighed. They had specifically mentioned UAP when explaining everything to Parker, but it shouldn't have mattered. "I don't know why everyone thinks that. The key word is *unidentified*. Jumping to the conclusion that it was aliens defeats the whole point of calling it a UFO or a UAP."

"Jumping to conclusions is how I thought I'd never like country music," Nova said. "And then Beyoncé proved me wrong."

"Ignore them," Rora said. "They're trying to be scientific,"

Parker's eyes shifted nervously from Nova to Mattie to Rora before he finally said, "It would be cool if it was aliens, though."

Rora's face lit up like fireworks. "New kid gets it!"

"For the third time, his name is Parker," Mattie said before turning her attention fully to Parker. "Can you do it?"

"And just a forewarning," Nova said. "You and I are going to have several in-depth discussions on the pros and cons of different drone-controller frequencies."

"Dude, I was in the moment you guys mentioned aliens."

ATOMIC FRINGE

