CHAPTER ONE:

"Spencer, get back in your seat! You are being so disrespectful right now, and I do *not* appreciate it," screamed Mrs. Frown.

Swishing his wand back and forth, up and down, Spencer, the class bully, had excused himself to walk around the classroom in the middle of Mrs. Frown's lesson on Human Earth. To be fair, Mrs. Frown's lesson was getting pretty boring.

Level One -- the first year of Academy X -- meant we finally got to meet the forbidden topic of Human Earth. At the start of the year, we were *fascinated*. But, a couple months into Level One, we realized that we were only opening one of many locks to this hidden world. The rest were to be opened in the later Levels of Academy X.

"But, Mrs. Frown, I don't get it," sneered Spencer. "I mean what's the point of *learning* about Human Earth, when we can *be* on Human Earth?"

Mrs. Frown let out a mysterious smile that had me both surprised and frightened. I fumbled to take my glasses off and rubbed my eyes to make sure that I wasn't seeing things. Literally, her name is Mrs. *Frown*, need I say more? "Well Spencer, maybe if you let me continue, then you might just have your words come true."

Spencer's eyes widened, and excited whispers erupted into a full fire of conversation. Jumping up and down in their chairs, everyone was busy talking to their friends. As I put my glasses back on, I quietly looked around, hoping that someone would also talk to me. But, as usual, I felt my eyes fall back down to the same top-left corner of my wooden desk, and I continued carving a half-finished wand with my pencil.

"Okay class, that's enough," warned Mrs. Frown. Her sharp eyes and thin lips gradually moved around the classroom to instantly blow out the few daring flames of

any remaining conversation. Mrs. Frown continued, “At the end of Level One, you are expected to complete a group project about your experiences on Human Earth.”

A hand in the front row shot up, “Wait Mrs. Frown, Mrs. Frown, Mrs. Frown, are you saying that we will be transporting to Human Earth?” There were sparkles in everyone’s eyes, and ears were wide open.

Mrs. Frown replied, “Francesca, you know better than to speak before I see your hand. I know you all are very excited, but you cannot be ignoring all of our classroom rules, especially throughout this project.” Mrs. Frown noticed the sparkles did not dim, and her awkward smile emerged again, “But, yes Francesca, you will all be making your first trip to Human Earth. Your completion of this project will mark the end of Level One in Academy X.”

Everyone was at the edges of their seats with huge smiles, restlessly glancing from their friends to Mrs. Frown, and back. I tried my best to not stand out, and I guess it wasn’t that hard, since I just barely existed in the back corner of the last row. *I wish I could also go to Human Earth, just like everyone else*.

“I will now announce your groups and your group members for the rest of the year,” announced Mrs. Frown. “Group 1 will be Treek, Francesca, Goopy, and Reef. Group 2 will be Ugby, Polar, Jilly, and Gus. Group 3 will be Club, Pac, Ollie, and Chad. And, our last group will be…”

Hold on. No, no, no. If I haven’t been called yet, and so hasn’t…

“Spencer, Violet, Kim, and Zerd.” Mrs. Frown ruthlessly finished my thought.

Spencer turned back with a mocking smile, and I frantically looked down at the same corner of my wooden desk with the wand now completed.

CHAPTER TWO:

With the shrill of the lunch bell, a rattling shake moved throughout the entire class. Mrs. Frown had managed to squeeze in the last of what seemed like an endless list of our Human Earth project rules. And she also managed to squeeze out all our excitement. After hearing one warning after another -- *do not eat Human Earth food...do not transport unsupervised...do not spend more than two days on Human Earth...do not forget all my Human Earth lessons…* -- the class had snuck into a sly slumber.

Let me just quickly grab my lunch, and find an empty bench outside. I really only had one mission: Avoid Spencer at all costs during the lunch period.

Spencer is the *class* bully, so it is not like he only bothers me in our Level One class of Academy X. *But*, I am his favorite one to bully. If it was not obvious earlier, the truth is...I am…well...I am *different*. Our world is occupied by Shilings who have the special ability to transport to Human Earth with the flick of a wand -- an ability that I do not have. Technically, I look like all the other Shilings. I have our distinctive ears and noses, and I even have our special little waddle. However, while every Shiling has been assigned a specific location on Human Earth, and has the lifelong mission from birth to protect this part of Human Earth from dangerous changes in the climate, I was never assigned a location. I know that Mom and Dad know *why*, but they always either pretend like they do not or push the topic away. Mom and Dad probably think that it is not yet the best time to tell me the truth, and I cannot bring myself to ask more because I know that it hurts them when the topic is brought up -- I see it in their eyes. Whatever

the reason, what I do know though is that I am born different, and I *cannot* transport to Human Earth.

"Hey Zerd!" screamed Spencer from the cafeteria doors. I recalled my earlier mission, and scrambled to grab a lunch tray.

"Zerd...Zeeerd...Zeeeeeeerd!" Spencer's voice was getting closer and closer, but I was also reaching the end of the lunch line. Finally, I grabbed the last of our lunch -- pickles and apple juice -- and ran outside with my lunch tray just before Spencer caught on to the fact that I could hear him.

When I sat down at an empty bench, I let out a sigh. A sigh not of relief, but of sadness and loneliness. In front of the pickles that I loved, I felt tears welling up, and a blurry sight penetrated throughout my glasses. *Yeah, I know that I always expected this day to come. But...but...I was hoping it also might not.*

It was a dumb hope though, so I guess it is all my fault in the end. When Mom and Dad called me the night before my first day of Level One, I thought I was going to finally receive my wand -- the same wand that I saw all the older Shilings carrying. Looking back, it was the same kind of dumb hope. I went into Mom and Dad's room wide-eyed and ecstatic, but I came out of Mom and Dad's room with the truth that I was "different," and from then on, I knew that I could never be a normal Shiling. All the action movies and adventure books I ravenously watched and read, they were just that to me: movies and books. I could never be the heroic and brave main character -- let alone, a supporting character. I did not fit in.

And Mrs. Frown's announcement of the Level One class project scared me. While the entire class screamed and clapped their hands in joy, I felt so small and out of

place. And Spencer! How could the world be so cruel? Of all my classmates, how did Spencer end up in the same group as me? When the class found out about my secret, it was like Spencer found a treasure box. This treasure box let Spencer bully me in new ways each and every day.

The tears finally began to drip over my lunch tray.

Why was I born like this? Why can I not transport to Human Earth? I just want to be a normal Shiling.

"Are you okay?" whispered a voice from behind. Startled, I gave a little jump before turning back with my face of streaming tears.

Violet? What was she doing here?

"Are you okay, Zerd?" repeated Violet.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I murmured after clumsily wiping my tears away.

"I was behind Spencer when he was calling your name, and I saw you run out of the cafeteria. I was just a little worried."

"Thanks Violet, but you don't have to worry. I'm fine."

"Oh well...okay then. I guess I'll see you in class then." Violet gave a dispirited smile, and headed back to the cafeteria.

Oh Zerd, why'd you do that? Violet was just trying to be nice to you.

I looked back down at my now soggy lunch, and picked up the apple juice. Just as I had my first sip, the lunch bell rang again. *Here we go, Zerd*.

CHAPTER THREE:

“We have a small change in plans. I know I promised the rest of the day with your group members, but I wanted to quickly finish up our earlier lesson before moving on. We will be talking about the similarities and differences of Human Earth and the world of Shilings before meeting in your assigned groups to complete an assignment on the lesson,” announced Mrs. Frown. *Thirty minutes less with Spencer? I’ll gladly take it.*

Mrs. Frown began by showing us a globe of Human Earth. She noted, “While Human Earth is not older than our world, it is still quite old -- around 4.5 billion years old, actually. On this globe, Human Earth just looks like it has blue spots, or its waters, and green spots, or its lands. But, the environment on Human Earth is not so simple -- or else, Shilings would not need to help Human Earth. In our world, you all know that we also have much more than blue spots and green spots. Human Earth, however, is actually more diverse than our world in its variety of environmental conditions and climates. And, in Level Two, you will learn more about these different environments and climates.”

This time, Francesca remembered to not interrupt Mrs. Frown. But she raised her hand so fiercely that she did not fail to catch the attention of all those behind her, and all those in front of her -- that is, Mrs. Frown.

“Yes, Francesca?” sighed Mrs. Frown.

“Mrs. Frown, are you saying that the en...enviro...uhhh the e-word that you just said makes Human Earth more special than our world?” asked Francesca.

“*Environment*. Well, Francesca, our goal in Level One is to help you imagine the differences between our world and Human Earth. And I understand why you may see these differences to mean Human Earth is more special. But, as you continue your

studies in Academy X, you will soon learn that Human Earth may be better described as *different*, rather than *special*. I hope that answers your question, Francesca."

"Oh I see, thank you, Mrs. Frown," chirped Francesca.

After giving a sharp nod, Mrs. Frown continued, "In our world, everyone lives in the same climate -- no matter where they are. And climate is kind of like weather, but it measures, for example, temperature, wind, humidity, snow, and rain over a longer period of time. But these average measurements change depending on which part of Human Earth you are in." Circling around the globe with her finger, Mrs. Frown remarked, "For example, while the middle part of Human Earth is quite hot, the top and bottom parts are really cold. Although you'll learn about many more of these different climates in Level Two, I wanted to share a little more about the purpose of your missions as Shilings."

Noting the increased attention in the room, Mrs. Frown asserted, "It is the mission of Shilings to protect these *diverse* climates on Human Earth. If we were to imagine the average measurements as varying amounts of different ingredients in cake -- for example the average measurement of rain as the average amount of sugar, the average measurement of temperature as the average amount of flour, and so on -- then the combination of these different proportions of cake ingredients would result in a different cake each time. Similarly, in the diverse climate types of Human Earth, you can find unique cake recipes -- some areas may have a lot of sugar to make it a sweeter cake, and other areas may have a lot of flour to make it a denser cake. There are different patterns and trends within each particular climate type, as well. However, in our world, there is basically only one cake recipe, or one climate type, which all Shilings

experience. This is how Human Earth can be so diverse with all of its various plants and animals and climates. But, there have been many changes that are endangering this special diversity of Human Earth. While there were climate changes that happened before the time of humans on Human Earth...Actually, does anybody know why we call Human Earth, *Human* Earth?"

There she goes again. Mrs. Frown always asks a question that clearly nobody knows the answer to, and she allows -- maybe even enjoys -- the most intense and uncomfortable seconds of silence to pass. I have a theory that she just loves to see our blank expressions, and be in complete power -- evil, I know.

"Because nobody seems to know the answer, let me…"

Just then, Violet's hand slowly lifted towards the air. Mrs. Frown and the whole class took notice. Violet was the smartest student in Level One, but she was so quiet and shy, and rarely spoke in class.

A little surprised, Mrs. Frown asked, "Did you have something to share, Violet?"

"Yes, Mrs. Frown. We have come to call Human Earth by its name because while there were climate changes before the time of humans, these were sort of like natural changes, and they did not require Shilings to help Human Earth. But, since the growing presence of humans on Human Earth, the relationship of love and respect we have for our environment as Shilings, was increasingly unable to be seen in the Humans. And we began calling Earth, Human Earth, as Humans were creating so many changes -- quite *unnatural* changes -- to the environment in a short period of time."

Well, that was unexpected...Go Violet?

At first, Mrs. Frown seemed a little upset that her evil plan didn't go accordingly, but -- as though she remembered it was Violet who answered the question -- she smiled, "Excellent, Violet!" After tapping her finger on the globe for a while, Mrs. Frown decided, "Okay, how about we get into your groups now?"

I made the mistake of looking at the clock to the right of the classroom. After checking to see how much time we had before the bell would ring, my eyes fell right below the clock. *Oh boy*. Piercing through my glasses were Spencer's snarky eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Twirling his wand around his plump fingers, Spencer could not move his gaze away from me. *Do NOT look him in the eyes, Zerd. Keep your eyes down and away!* Violet and Kim, who were my other two group members, also noticed, and were clearly uncomfortable.

I mustered up some courage to strike the first conversation, "Hey, it's a...a...it's great to be in a group with you all." *Pathetic.*

"Wow Zerd, isn't that so nice of you? I must say it is *great* to be in a group with you," snickered Spencer.

Violet quickly interjected, "Thanks Zerd, I am glad that we can all work together, too."

I slowly lifted my head back up. And, before I knew it, I was staring at Violet. Violet was probably the one person in Level One that Spencer did not bully, but she always kept to herself, and rarely made any comments against Spencer.

Spencer was clearly taken aback, too. But it was just for the slightest moment, as the ends of his mouth quickly creeped back up, and he focused his attention back to me. “So Zerd, since you’re so excited for this project, tell me, how are *you* going to not be a bad group member? I just don’t see what role a wand-less Shiling could contribute to our group.”

It hurt. *“Wand-less Shiling” -- that’s a first*. I try to put up a shield against his words, but Spencer always manages to find the most cutting and hurtful words that pierce through my shield. I felt humiliated and shamed -- and it really hurt.

Violet and Kim gave each other a concerned slide glance. This time, Kim spoke up, “Hey Spencer, knock it off. It’s not like you’re the most perfect group member that we could have asked for.”

Furious and annoyed, Spencer got ready to snap back, but Mrs. Frown asked the class to quiet down. “Okay, hopefully you were all able to say hi to your group members. Now, I will announce your first weekend assignment: You will all be making your first trip to Human Earth.”

Violet and Kim were stunned, and even Spencer forgot his fury. Mrs. Frown carried on, “And we will now take the time to undergo a 3-D simulation on what you may expect on your very first transportation.”

It was *the* 3-D simulation that marked the highlight of Level One in Academy X. Through the simulation, young Shilings have their closest experiences with Human Earth yet.

Before the class could process the entirety of Mrs. Frown’s announcement, she continued, “Okay, each individual will go to one of the Experience Rooms on the first

floor. When I call your name, please begin walking quietly to the room number that I assign you. Treek, one; Francesca, two; Violet, three; Gus, four…"

Why am I always the last one to be called? I know Mrs. Frown doesn't mean any harm, but I wonder if she just pushes me as far back in her mind as possible.

Mrs. Frown concluded, *"...*Club, eleven; and Zerd, twelve."

As I was the last one to leave Mrs. Frown's classroom, she gave me her usual "don't-worry-you're-special-too" supportive smile, but it came out so strange every time -- and this one was not an exception. After returning a brief smile, I hurried out of the classroom.

Oh, Mrs. Frown… Wait, this is THE 3-D simulation that we all had been waiting for since the start of Academy X. All of the young Shilings have had moments when their older siblings would dangle their first simulation in the Experience Room as a shiny medal in front of them. But, Fernandez, my older brother, is the nicest sibling anyone could have asked for, so he has never bragged about his Human Earth simulations or transportations. But I know that the Experience Room marks one of the first steps in becoming a *real* Shiling.

Stumbling over a wood plank, I caught my balance. Looking up after the close call, I realized that I was already in front of "Experience Room 12." I gaped at the sign for a while before I took a deep breath, and grabbed the brass door knob.

"Hi Zerd!" welcomed Mr. Sunny. He got up from his chair, and waddled towards me.

"Hello, Mr. Sunny," I responded.

"Alright Zerd, so are you ready for your simulation? How are you feeling?"

“I’m a little nervous, but I’m mostly excited.”

“Well, this is a big moment for a Shiling, so it is okay that you feel a little nervous! I’ll walk you through the whole experience, so don’t worry too much.”

“Thanks, Mr. Sunny.”

“Of course, Zerd. Why don’t we start then?” Motioning for me to follow his lead, Mr. Sunny walked to the center of the room, closer to a black-curtained box. “Okay, so let’s take a moment to loosen up and shake our bodies a bit.”

Mr. Sunny clearly enjoyed this part of the process -- he really let himself loose. I, on the other hand, just gave a little shake in my arms and legs.

“Now that we’re all warmed up, you are basically ready to step into the box, Zerd! When you walk in, there will be a special wand for you because...uh…I know that you...uh...don’t have your wand just yet.” Mr. Sunny gave a warm but sheepish smile, but I couldn’t be upset around Mr. Sunny, who is one of my favorite teachers at Academy X.

“That’s okay, Mr. Sunny. What do I do with the wand inside the box?” I asked.

“Great question, Zerd! So with the wand in your hand, you’re going to swirl your hand three times counterclockwise, and two times clockwise, and one times counterclockwise, again. Three, two, one! That’s all you have to remember, and also that you also start with *counter*clockwise.”

With Mr. Sunny’s caring guidance and encouragement, I felt prepared and supported, “Alright, I think I’m ready, Mr. Sunny.”

Mr. Sunny perked up, “You think you got this, Zerd?” I returned a confident nod. “Okay, Zerd, this simulation will only last about a minute. And you will be able to see

India, which is one of the hottest countries in the world. You can look around, and move a little to get a feel for Human Earth transportations. Alright, step inside the box whenever you are ready, and don't forget three, two, one! Counterclockwise, first!"

With each step towards the black curtains, anxiety and excitement stirred inside of me. I stepped inside, and saw the wand I could never call my own. *Three two one*. Mr. Sunny's words disrupted my distracting thoughts, and I grabbed the wand that slipped into my hands effortlessly.

Three swirls counterclockwise, two swirls clockwise, and one swirl counter…

And that was my first and last Human Earth experience I thought I would ever come close to -- at least, I thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

A slight breeze ran against my body, as a lone flyer rode along this breeze before landing right in front of my feet. "The Story of a Shilling and Human," shouted the flyer with its vibrant colors and eye-catching font. *Just another movie advertisement*.

I let out a sigh.

For the brief minute in the Experience Room, I had emotions I never felt before. It was the shortest, but also the longest minute of my life. In the Experience Room, I felt like a *real* Shiling. Not a wand-less Shiling, nor a useless Shiling -- a *real* Shiling. But like all moments in life, time passes, and I left the box, said goodbye to Mr. Sunny, and left the Experience Room. Walking back to Mrs. Frown's classroom with a mix of light and heavy steps, I returned back to my normal world. A world where Spencer, Mrs. Frown, and me -- a wand-less Shiling -- existed. Mrs. Frown announced our weekend

homework to make our first trip to Human Earth, and reminded us to be prepared to share our experiences. The class was cheerful, while I wanted to hide. Mrs. Frown caught me before I left the classroom after the bell rang, and, as she usually does, gave me yet another alternative assignment to complete.

Another sigh escaped me.

Raising my eyes from the ground, I looked around the town. The bright, blue skies, blossoming flowers, and lush greenery were almost mockingly beautiful. Our town has a special connection with the environment. From a very young age, Shilings learn to have respect for the environment, while also learning to have respect for other Shilings and the rules of all Shillings. Although we get to talk about the history of this special connection in the later levels of Academy X, I know my brother, Fernandez, is now learning about the politics of Human Earth that often does not contribute to this same relationship that we as Shilings have with our environment. Fernandez was assigned one of the most honorable placements a Shiling can receive at birth, which was to work at an *international* level for helping Human Earth's climate. I could not ever be mad at Fernandez, and I know he'll make Mom and Dad proud, but it is hard to try and not compare my life with my brother's sometimes.

Before yet another sigh could emerge, I let out a shout, "Oh my pickles!" Someone had sneaked up from the back, and screamed my name in my right ear.

I quickly turned back, and Fernandez's perfect, beaming smile was shining at me. "Did I scare ya, Zerds?" Fernandez chuckled.

"Fernandez!" I yelled.

With eyes that smiled as widely as his mouth, Fernandez said, “Sorry, Zerds. I was just excited to see ya! How was Academy X today?”

“Well, we had our first Experience Room simulation today...And we also got our assignment to make our first Human Earth transportation.” Fernandez’s smile dropped a little at the corners, and concern began slowly filling his eyes.

“Aww Zerds...how are you feeling?” I appreciated this about Fernandez. Fernandez knows when to give me the space to talk and to be listened to. Sometimes even Mom and Dad do not do this as well as Fernandez. They are so worried that I will feel bad, and I can see this in them, so I just hold off from saying too much so that they do not have to feel sad.

“Honestly, I’m not too sure. I was just thinking about it on my walk home, and it’s just kind of a lot, ya know?”

“Yeah, it is, Zerds. And that’s okay to not be sure. Wanna race home, grab some pickles, and talk about it?”

Fernandez and I gave each other our classic side glance, nod, and fist-- our special sign that we shared since as long as I could remember.

“Three, two one!” I called out.

CHAPTER SIX

The weekend surprisingly flew by, and, as usual, I waited until the last moment to complete my homework. In fact, I just barely managed to finish Mrs. Frown’s special assignment before grabbing a piece of toast, and heading to Academy X.

Academy X was not too far from my home, so Mom and Dad let me walk to and from Academy X on my own. I would walk with Fernandez, but he always went to school in the wee hours to help out his teachers at Academy X. A goody two shoes -- I know -- but, again, Fernandez was just someone you could not hate.

As I approached the gates of Academy X, I could already sense a buzzing excitement in the air. Jilly and Gus in my Level One class passed the gates while battling in what seemed like who-had-the-better-first-Human-Earth-transportation debate.

I thought I'd be okay… Talking with Fernandez, and being at home for the weekend, I really thought that I would be fine today at school. But, my heart felt like it dropped when I first heard parts of Jilly and Gus's conversation.

I took a deep breath, and began making my steps towards the gates.

"Hey, Zerd!" called a voice from behind.

Initially, I did not recognize the voice. And, when I turned around, I realized that it was because it was a unison of Violet and Kim.

"Oh, hey, Violet and Kim," I murmured.

We naturally began walking together in a group, and the steps into the gates of Academy X were easier than I had imagined.

"So, how were your weekends?" I asked.

Violet seemed to carefully, but caringly, share, "It was pretty nice, Zerd! Thanks for asking. How was yours?"

"Nothing special, I guess. It was fine."

Just as Violet was about to respond, I saw Spencer at the corner of my eyes, and I quickly interrupted, “I have to use the restroom before class, so I’ll catch you all later!”

And I quickly ran into the building.

Throughout the morning, Mrs. Frown had a packed schedule for the class. She had us ask and answer questions on Human Earth, as well as independently write about our experiences. Before we knew it, the lunch bell had rung, and I managed to enjoy a peaceful lunch with my favorite pickles on the side.

I walked into the classroom, expecting another quick activity to be led by Mrs. Frown before the school day ended. But, boy, I was not prepared.

“Okay, class. Thank you for sharing all of your experiences and reflections from your first Human Earth transportation this morning. Now, you will get the chance to talk with your group members until the end of our school day. In your groups, I want you to focus on the problems of Human Earth that you were able to see even in your short first trip,” Mrs. Frown revealed.

As we all began moving towards our groups at Mrs. Frown’s announcement, I internally braced myself for the second group meeting -- or rather, the second meeting with Spencer.

Before Spencer could choose which of his treasured nasty remarks to make, Mrs. Frown announced, “Thank you for getting into your groups quietly and quickly. Please assign the order in which you will present in your groups, and begin sharing.” As she was walking around the classroom, Mrs. Frown paused, and gave a stern look to Spencer before continuing, “I will be walking around to listen to the group discussions,

so please do not stray off topic, and be *respectful* to your group members when they are presenting."

Violet and Kim gave each other a small, yet proud, smile, and I knew that this was their work. I felt both embarrassed and reassured.

"So, does anybody want to begin?" asked Violet.

Spencer began, "How about we have Mr. Wandl-" But, he caught Mrs. Frown's strict stance standing nearby, and he receded swiftly, "Actually, I can go first because I *know* that I have a lot to share about my very first Human Earth transportation."

Kim snarked, "Let's hear it, Spencer."

"Why thank you for your interest, Kim."

"My pleasure, Spencer."

"Well, first, I had a big breakfast on Saturday morning because I know that this is a big task for a Shiling, and I wanted to make sure my stomach was filled and happy," Spencer sarcastically began. "After a delicious breakfast, I got into my favorite outfit because I got to look good for my first Human Earth transportation. Then, my parents came into give me smooches of support." Kim snickered.

Annoyed, but invested in his storytelling, Spencer carried on, "I chanted, 'Three turns counterclockwise, two turns clockwise, and one turn counterclockwise' with my wand, and instantly, I transported onto Human Earth."

From that moment, I felt a strange buzzing in my ears.

Spencer continued, "After I caught my balance, one of the first things that I felt was a hot stinging on my back." I felt a hot strike across my back. Spencer remarked,

“The heat was so strong -- beyond any of our hottest days here.” The strike across my back spread across my body.

What’s happening?

“Sweat beads began to almost immediately form on my forehead, and my throat felt like I did not drink water for days.” I also felt these beads on my forehead, and I grabbed my throat in pain.

Spencer did not catch on, “When I looked around, I began to hear voices shouting -- rather gaping and gasping.” My left hand lifted from my throat to my ears, as I tried to block out these muffled sounds.

By then, I was shaking, and a sharp whizzing and buzzing cycled in my head. I felt my breath getting heavier and heavier. This time, Spencer, Violet, and Kim all noticed.

As Spencer stopped his painful story, Violet repeatedly asked, “Zerd! Are you okay, Zerd? Zerd, are you okay?” Taking slow and deep breaths, I felt the whizzing and buzzing calm a bit. As my mind began to gradually clear, I barely managed to fathom: *Woah, what was tha*t?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oh my pickles....

The school bell had dismissed Academy X about an hour ago, and after spending the last parts of the school day in the nurse’s office, I was walking home, and trying to process what had just happened.

So...Okay, let's start from the beginning. First, Mrs. Frown told us to get into our groups. Next, Spencer began presenting. Then, I started to almost exist *in his story. It was like I could see, hear, feel, and even smell and taste his Human Earth transportation.*

A sharp pain and burning thirst reminiscent of this experience interrupted my thought. The thing was that it was hard to understand what had happened because every time I tried to slowly return to Spencer's story, I felt all of my five senses perk up, as though it was the first time.

"Zerds!" It was a voice I knew I needed most.

I instantly turned back, and felt warm tears streaming down against my cheeks.

Concerned, Fernandez quickly ran towards me, shouting, "What's wrong, Zerd?"

"Fernandez...I...I...actually I don't know what's wrong...I wish I knew what was wrong, and maybe that would make things a little better," I sobbed.

"Okay, umm...let's first take a couple breaths. How about that, Zerd? Okay, let's take one breath...Whoo...another breath…Whoo…"

I felt my breath come back to a more steady pace.

"Alright, so how about you slowly tell me as much as you can and want, and if it becomes a little difficult, we'll take a break."

"Sounds like a plan, Fern." I gave a little smile, and I knew Fernandez had worked his magic yet again. "Okay, so we got into our groups for the Level One end-of-the-year project today, and Mrs. Frown wanted us to present on our first Human Earth transportations from the weekend. And, Spencer was the first to present. After being pretty annoying and snobby at the start, he got into his actual Human Earth

transportations, and that's when I began to feel this whizzing and buzzing sensation. It was even okay when he sang the chant to twirl the wand, but it was almost right when he finished the chant, and told us of what he saw on Human Earth that the whizzing and buzzing felt like my brain was about to burst."

I paused, and saw the worry in Fernandez's eyes, but I tried to relay a reassuring smile before continuing, "And then, each description he gave, I felt it. Literally, *felt* it. It was like I was standing on Human Earth right next to Spencer. It wasn't just that I could see what Spencer was seeing, but I could hear everything, feel everything, smell everything, and taste everything. It was a scorching strike across my back, and the driest desert that spanned across my tongue." I winced. "Even now, as I am telling you this, I relive the experiences, as though they have been permanently ingrained in my mind.

"Oh...Zerds, this is definitely a lot."

"Yeah, I know. I'm trying to remain calm -- I really am. But, it was so much at one time, and I just didn't know how to make sense of it, let alone who to tell. Violet and Kim -- and even Spencer -- were pretty worried because I mean I'm sure it looked like I was completely spaced out. And, Mrs. Frown just immediately sent me to the nurse's office. I felt okay enough to walk to the nurse alone, and by the time I got to the nurse's office, I was basically *normal*. I didn't feel any different than how I was before Spencer's story."

"So, you feel okay now, too? It's only when you heard Spencer's story and when you try to remember Spencer's story that you start to feel the whizzing and buzzing?"

"Yeah, that's what I've noticed so far, at least."

Our home had already come into sight, and Fernandez responded, “Woah. Thanks for sharing, Zerds. This must have been a super scary and overwhelming experience. I honestly haven’t heard of anything like this, so let me do some research and try to figure out what might be going on. Should we wait to tell Mom and Dad?”

We gave our signature nod silently, and knew it would be a mutual secret for the meantime.

After our usual family dinner, Fernandez kept checking in on me throughout the night. After like the fourteenth time, I finally bursted, “Ferns, I’m okay!”

A little embarrassed, Fernandez replied, “Alright, Zerds! I was just a little worried, ya know? Good night then, and let me know if you need anything!”

“Thanks, Ferns. I will. Will you turn off the lights on your way out? I think I’ll go to bed a little early tonight.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

After a night of tossing and turning, I forced my groggy eyes open, and braced myself for the school day. I was already the talk of the school -- whether directly or indirectly. I heard it among the students, and even among the teachers. And my “incident” in Mrs. Frown’s class was surely to ignite some sparks.

I bravely left the house after quickly washing up and eating breakfast, “Bye Mom and Dad -- love you!”

Surprisingly, most of the school morning felt normal, almost *too* normal. But, I chose not to question it too much. *Maybe I was just a little too worried?*

Deep in our Human Earth lesson, Mrs. Frown remarked, “When comparing Shilings to Humans, you may notice that there are more differences among Humans than those found among Shilings. What I mean by this is that we as Shilings all share the same language, culture, and society -- but, this is often not the case on Human Earth. These differences will be explored in Level Two, but I wanted to share this point because you may notice relationships, values, and systems that are not observed in our world on Human Earth. On Human Earth, there are, unfortunately, histories of inequality. Do we all know what inequality means?”

Francesca’s hand shot up, “Mrs. Frown, isn’t inequality like me getting a smaller pizza slice than my peers in the lunch line?”

Mrs. Frown let out a chuckle, but her expression soon turned to something I rarely saw in Mrs. Frown -- her expression turned sad. “Well, you’re right, Francesca. That is one example of an inequality. However, in *social* inequalities, the reason you might get a smaller pizza slice is not due to random or unintentioned chance. Rather, it is because you are not only determined to be different, but also unequal and even inferior. You may get a smaller pizza slice, and you may even not be *entitled* to any pizza slice.”

Mrs. Frown sensed our fear and confusion, but cautiously proceeded, “As Shilings on Human Earth, you may be helping the environmental challenges of Humans, but I want you all to remember that it is not just the environment you are helping to change, but also the society.”’

Just when Francesca’s curiosity began turning yet again, Treek shrieked.

I instantly looked towards Treek, and was horrified. A whirl of smoke spiraled upwards from Spencer's seat, revealing an empty chair. Spencer had suddenly vanished.

"Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness," Mrs. Frown was clearly freaked out, and for all the right reasons. Screeches and squeals circulated around our classroom, and a few students burst into tears.

For a couple minutes, Mrs. Frown permitted the screams and tears, as she was lost in her thoughts on both what had just happened and how to calm the class.

"Okay everyone -- can we all take three big breaths together?" Mrs. Frown requested.

Quieting into sniffles and puffs, Mrs. Frown led the class, "Alright, one, deep breath in...and deep breath out...two, deep breath in...and deep breath out...three, deep breath in...and deep breath out."

Mrs. Frown hesitated, before choosing to continue, "Because I trust you all, I am going to share what happened to Spencer. There are certain agreements made between our world and Human Earth that establish the relationship between Shilings and Humans. And it is our promised mission to help the environment of Human Earth. When there is trouble in the environment of Human Earth, we are to help resolve this trouble. Spencer was instantly transported to Human Earth right now because this is a sign from his placement on Human Earth that there is an emergency. Human Earth needs rules to be set by Shilings. More specifically, this was a symbol for *policy* change -- which is the entire focus of Level Seven of Academy X."

Level Seven? So this was what Fernadez was so excited about?

“On Human Earth, there are *cities*, *villages*, *states*, *nations*, and many other names describing different governing systems. All of these different governing systems have their own set of policies and policymakers, but they must all work in collaboration with each other. Some governing systems are at the same level -- as, for example, all students of Level One -- and some governing systems can be on differing levels -- as students of Level One compared to those in Level Three. But, as everyone has their own responsibilities at different levels to make up the entirety of Academy X, different governing systems are established to ultimately work in cooperation.”

Kim raised her hand, and asked, “Wait, why does it matter that there are different levels of governing systems? Are you saying that some ‘policies’ are more important than others?”

“Great question, Kim. Well, to answer your first question. It matters because different levels of government have to work together in order to fully support Humans. In fact, you will all realize in the future that Shilings are assigned according to these governing levels. For example, one Shiling may be assigned to a *local* level, another to a *regional* level, another to a *state* level, another to a *national* level, and another to an *international* level. And, for a simple comparison, what I mean is that one Shiling may be assigned to Level One, another to Level One and Level Two, another to Level One to Level Three, another to Level One to Level Seven -- or all of Academy X -- and another to Academy X, in relation to other academies. Did that make sense?”

Slow nods traveled across the class.

“Great! And to answer your second question, Kim. I would like to ask you all a question, would you imagine that a rule, or *policy*, made for students of Level One of Academy X is more important than a policy made for all students of Academy X?”

Violet raised her hand, “No, Mrs. Frown. Although a policy made for all of Academy X has a larger audience, a policy made for students of Level One can be just as important. The two policies simply differ in how many people they’re impacting, rather than one being better than the other.”

“Thank you, Violet. I would also agree that we cannot really compare the importance of policies set out by different governing levels. While a state, for instance, may be able to make a rule mandatory for the more local governments, ultimately, there must be collaboration -- not opposition and division -- among all governing levels for this state policy to be truly successful.”

Treek finally asked the question we were all wondering, “So what exactly happened to Spencer, and is he okay?”

“Spencer will be fine, yes. But, this was also not supposed to happen, as he is still in Level One. There must be a big problem at his placement on Human Earth -- a problem so large that an error occurred in our Shiling world.”

CHAPTER NINE

Emergency arose. Spencer vanished. Policy… Level Seven… Fernandez… What is going on?

Back home, and lying on my bed, my head felt like it was about to burst.

So, to summarize what Mrs. Frown was saying… Shilings have a mission to help Human Earth's environment because of an agreement made between the two worlds. And we do this by making rules, which she called policies, for Humans to follow. And these rules, or policies, have different groups and areas they apply to -- but they all need to still work together. When there is an environmental emergency in our Human Earth placement, Shilings can be instantly transported to Human Earth. Spencer vanished because of this emergency, but he also was not supposed to experience this yet because we are only in Level One.

I tried to piece things together one by one. Swift images passed in my mind, and soft strikes ran across my bare skin. I flinched.

Maybe that's why that hurt so much? When Spencer began talking about his first Human Earth transportation, I felt pain -- excruciating pain -- that I have never experienced before.

A knocking on my door cut through my thoughts.

"Come in!"

Fernandez peeked through with a big smile, "Hey Zerds. How was school?"

Slowly shaking my head, I let out a sigh, "You'd never believe me, Fernandez."

"Well, let's see. What's up?"

Oh wait -- right! Fernandez was in Level Seven!

"Spencer vanished."

"Spencer *what*?"

"Vanished."

“What do you mean vanished? Like he was absent, and didn’t come to Academy X, today?”

“No, he vanished in class today. Mrs. Frown explained to us that there was an emergency in his placement, and there must have been a mistake on Human Earth or in our world, but he was taken to Human Earth.”

Fernandez’s eyes had grown larger and larger, “So, you’re telling me there’s a *climate crisis* in Spencer’s placement, and he went to establish *environmental policies* for Human Earth?”

“Uhhh...climate crisis I’m guessing is environmental emergency, and Mrs. Frown mentioned the “policy” idea to us today -- so yeah, that’s what I think is going on.”

Fernandez looked a little scared, “Zerd, this is big.”

“What do you mean?” I was taken aback. I knew this was not normal, and that this was not supposed to happen, but I had not expected to see Fernandez like this.

“Zerd, there is a balance between Human Earth and the Shiling world that must always be in place. This balance was disrupted.”

“And, Spencer was caught in the middle of all this?”

“Partially, I’m thinking.”

“Well, sucks for him.”

“Zerd, cut that out.”

I knew that probably wasn’t the nicest thing to say, but so what? Spencer was THE class bully, and I couldn’t help but think he kind of deserved it. He lived off the misery and sadness of others, including me. Maybe even Human Earth and the Shiling World made an agreement that he was just too much.

I held my ground, “What? Spencer was so mean to everyone anyways, so why should we be worrying so much for him? Let him work through his own problems.”

Fernandez explained, “Zerd, I’m not saying that Spencer is the nicest person in the world. And, I’m not saying that Spencer was right to be a bully.”

“Exactly, so your point is?”

“Well, I’m getting to it, Zerds, if you’d let me talk. I’m not saying Spencer is right, but from my experiences, there might be a reason that Spencer acts the way he does. You know what happened to his sister, too, right? I’m not bringing this up to be on Spencer’s side, come on -- I’m a proud brother of my one and only Zerds! Instead, I’m bringing this up, so you learn to not blame Spencer -- and more importantly, not yourself -- but rather, hopefully learn to understand and forgive.”

“I try to understand...but, he also really hurts me sometimes. And, it’s hard to forgive when I feel pain.”

“Yeah… forgiving is hard. We can’t erase our pain, and we also can’t erase the image of the one who gave the pain. And, it’s something I’m still learning, too. Maybe forgiving isn’t erasing, though. Maybe forgiving is gradually releasing the pain. And that’s where I think we need the understanding part because when we begin to really understand the other person and ourselves, the pain begins to slowly go away. Sure, it may always ache, and at times, suddenly even burst in agony because we’ll always remember, and because forgiving isn’t forgetting. But, oftentimes, when we learn to empower ourselves by the tool of understanding, forgiving can make us bigger people.”

“Forgiving isn’t forgetting...I actually really like that, Ferns. Who knew you could be a real big brother sometimes?”

Laughing in unison, Fernandez and I got into a playful pillow fight on my bed. Soon, we both scrambled to call a tie, and we collapsed on my bedroom floor, completely out of breath.

Looking up towards the ceiling, a lightbulb clicked. *I think I can help Spencer*.

CHAPTER TEN

As Mrs. Frown dismissed the class to break off into our group discussions, I impatiently waited for Violet and Kim. When they finally joined me -- determined and confident -- I led the group discussion.

Quietly, but firmly, I said, “Listen carefully, I think we can help Spencer.”

Violet seemed confused. “What do you mean, Zerd?”

“Remember when Mrs. Frown said all Shilings are assigned to different governing levels, and these different governing level often have to collaborate to make rules for Human Earth?”

Violet and Kim nodded, but were still skeptical. Kim remarked, “Yeah, what about that?”

“Well, there’s something I didn’t tell you all yet…” I lowered my voice to a whisper, and motioned for Violet and Kim to lean towards the center. “I can *feel* Human Earth through *your* Human Earth experiences.”

Violet straightened her back towards her seat, and Kim was more blunt, as she released a mocking snicker.

“Look, I know it sounds crazy. But it’s true. And we can all help Spencer -- *together*. When Spencer shared his first Human Earth transportation, do you both

remember when I was acting weird like I was deadly sick?" Confirming that they were listening, I continued, "I could *feel* what Spencer was saying. My eyes, my nose, my mouth, my ears, my hands, every part of my body felt what Spencer was describing. I felt like I was standing right where Spencer was, and like I was seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and touching everything Spencer was experiencing."

Both Violet and Kim had returned closer and closer towards the center, and their eyes had also grown larger and larger. Violet questioned, "Zerd, so...so you're saying...Wait, but how?"

"I don't know."

Kim added, "So Spencer was the first time this happened?"

"Yeah, first time. And I really don't know why this is happening to me. But, now that it does, I'm going to work with it. Spencer is in trouble, and from what I experienced, his placement right now on Human Earth is in really bad conditions."

Violet's wheels began to turn, "So, that's why you were in so much pain when Spencer was sharing?"

"Exactly. Before I tell you both my plan, I need to make sure that I'm correct on one thing."

"What is it, Zerd?" Violet asked.

"I need you both to tell me more about your Human Earth experiences."

As Violet and Kim began sharing one after another, the pieces began to slowly click. *I knew it. Violet, Kim, and Spencer have different placements, but they're all related. Along with Fernandez's Level Seven lessons and my special power, we can help Spencer*.

Just as I was about to announce my plan to Violet and Kim, we heard a scream from the front of the class. Spencer had appeared looking scraggy, aloof, and defeated.

CHAPTER ELEVEN Can't wait to read what happens next!!

Spencer fell to his knees, and gaped for water, "I'm so thirsty. Someone please...help me, I need water."

Mrs. Frown scrambled for her extra water bottle, and ran towards Spencer. Spencer grasped the bottle, and finished every last drop without pausing for a breath.

Spencer's eyes began to open just a little bit wider, yet the fear and distance in his eyes had not disappeared.

Mrs. Frown also fell to her knees to meet Spencer's eyes, "Spencer, are you alright?"

"Mrs. Frown...I...Mrs. Frown…" Spencer's eyes began producing small beads of water.

Spencer's crying?!

"It's okay, Spencer. Take your time," Mrs. Frown reassured. Just then, the school bell rang, and Mrs. Frown announced, after a pause, "Alright, thank you everyone for your hard work today. I'll see you all tomorrow, and you are dismissed from class today."

As the class began to pack their bags in confusion and worry, slowly but surely, one by one, the class began to empty. Amidst all this, Spencer and Mrs. Frown remained on their knees towards the front of the classroom.

Sending a silent message to Violet and Kim, I made sure they would not leave without me. Saying goodbye to Mrs. Frown, we were the last ones to leave the classroom. While I made the motion of closing the door, I was careful not to close it completely.

As my hand left the doorknob, I whispered to Violet and Kim, “Pssst...Violet! Kim! Come here.” They quietly walked back towards me. “We need to find out what happened to Spencer.”

Kim whispered back, “Well, Mrs. Frown clearly wanted a private conversation.”

“*Well*, we have to know what happened in order to help Spencer.”

Violet asked, “So what’s your plan, Zerd?”

I pointed towards the small slit of our classroom door. “I’m going to listen, and visit Spencer’s experiences on Human Earth.”

Kim responded, “Look, Zerd. Spencer seemed really out of it earlier, are you sure you’ll be alright?”

Before I could respond, Mrs. Frown began talking, and we all became silent. *Well, I guess I’ll have to be alright*.

“Spencer, can you tell me what happened?”

Spencer’s tears had begun to dry, “At the start, all I remember was that I was definitely at my seat, but the next moment, I was on Human Earth. And, I promise I wasn’t playing with my wand, Mrs. Frown!”

“I know, Spencer. I believe you.”

“And...and...from my very first Human Earth transportation, I could sense something really different. Something really different from our world of Shilings. I know

it's not the case for all of Human Earth, but when I transported, I was met with instant heat." *I also began to transport to Human Earth through my senses.* "It wasn't just hot, Mrs. Frown. It was painful. It felt like heat that could burn, like boiling water, except it was like invisible boiling water." *I flinched.*

"And, what about this second time, Spencer?"

"It felt just as hot, if not, hotter. And this time, I was stuck on Human Earth because I didn't have my wand with me. When I began to finally look around, I saw a building close by me. I wanted to run towards the building, but I knew that would hurt too much. So I just walked there as fast as I could, but carefully." *I felt the gusts of burning breezes, as Spencer had felt.*

"And, did you make it to the building?"

Spencer smiled for the first time, "Yeah. And it felt so, so cool, Mrs. Frown." *I also felt liberated, as a cooling sensation relieved the scars of the burning heat.* "After taking in a couple of breaths, I realized that the building had glass walls, and you could see all of the city in the building." *My eyes morphed into Spencer's eyes.*

"If I could describe the city in one color, it would be red. I was able to reach the top floor of the building, and when I looked out, I saw the color red raging throughout the entire city."

"What do you mean, Spencer?"

"It's kind of hard to describe. But I could *see* the heat. There was almost nobody outside. The few people that I did see held what looked like umbrellas to shield themselves in walking from one building to another." *Indeed, they did kind of look like umbrellas.*

“And the buildings...not all of the buildings were *equal*. There were some, like the one I was in, that looked very nice, and was very cool. But, there were others that looked ragged, and just barely managed to shield Humans from dying under the heat.” *I saw these Humans suffering, thin and dehydrated, and they could be mockingly compared to the Humans in the nice, cool buildings.*

Mrs. Frown looked really concerned, “Spencer, your city is in trouble.”

“I know, Mrs. Frown.” Tears began to well up again, “What can I do? Some people weren’t making it because of how hot it was, and I just sat there in the cool building, unable to do anything. I’m a *Shiling* -- I’m supposed to help Human Earth. But I couldn’t do anything.”

Mrs. Frown, locked in her thoughts, silently patted Spencer’s back, “It’s not your fault, Spencer...It’s not your fault.”

Violet quietly shut the door, and the three of us all sat in the same silence that came over Mrs. Frown and Spencer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I don’t know how many minutes had passed in that silence, but I heard Spencer and Mrs. Frown getting up, and I quickly snapped out of it.

“Pssst...Let’s go!”

We rushed out from the hallway, and continued until we eventually left the doors of Academy X. A gust of wind that signaled the early evening passed by.

Kim broke the silence, “So, now what?”

“I...I don’t know.” I wished with all my heart I could answer that question.

Violet began thinking, “Wait… Zerd, your brother’s in Level Seven, right?”

“Yeah, why do you…” The same lightbulb that clicked in Violet flickered in my head, and I continued, excitedly, “Yes, Fernandez is in Level Seven! He can help us!”

Violet smiled. “I have some time before I have to be back home for dinner. How about we go see Fernandez? Kim, were you free, too?”

Kim was chic, but interested, in her response, “Yeah, I’m on board.”

We ran against the gusts of wind with hope and resolve, and finally arrived at my house. When we went inside, I saw that my parents weren’t home yet, so I called out, “Hey, Fernandez! Come down for a second.”

In a muffled voice, Fernandez shouted, “Alright, coming!”

Soon, we could see Fernandez coming down the stairs, and he was slightly taken aback, but gave his usual big smile, “Hi, Violet and Kim!”

“Hi Fernandez!”

“Well, what brings the trio here today?”

“More bad news than good news, I guess,” Kim answered.

I rushed to fill in Spencer with all the happenings, and Violet and Kim intervened from time to time with additional thoughts and details.

When we had all finished, Spencer whispered under his breath, “Spencer is struggling to *locally* address his extreme heat conditions.”

“Wait, *locally*? Mrs. Frown mentioned that word, too.” I recalled.

“Yeah, it describes one of the governing, or rule-making, levels. The local level would be Spencer’s city. And, from what you all are telling me, it seems like Kim, you

have the *regional* level, and Violet, you have the *national* level. And Zerds, well what *do* you have?" Fernandez teased.

"Hey, cut it out. Wait, what do you mean by saying Spencer has the local level, Kim has the regional level, and Violet has the national level?"

"It's a little complicated. But, to summarize it, it's… it's kind of like making pizza! At the *local* level, you have your ingredients -- technically, they are all their own ingredients, but they are all special and necessary. At the *regional* level, you begin organizing your ingredients into the dough, sauce, cheese, and toppings categories. And, at the *national* level, you actually assemble your pizza together."

Violet chimed in, "So, you're saying that Spencer might be the mozzarella cheese, for example. And Kim can put Spencer's mozzarella cheese with all the other cheeses in the pizza. And I use this cheese, along with the other *regional* groups of dough, sauce, and toppings, to make the pizza?"

"Yes, exactly!"

Kim asked, "So what's wrong with Spencer's mozzarella cheese?"

"Glad to see you all understand my example," Fernandez chuckled. "Nothing's *wrong* with Spencer's mozzarella cheese, as much as the pizza recipe might be wrong. You see, even if there's a 'problem' with Spencer's cheese, imagine this. What if Kim put Spencer's mozzarella cheese in the dough category, and Violet used this dough in assembling the pizza? Or, what if Kim correctly put Spencer's mozzarella cheese in the cheese category, but Violet used the cheese before the sauce in assembling the pizza?"

"It wouldn't really be pizza then?"

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be pizza. That’s why you have to all work as a team, doing your own separate, but important, duties, to make sure the pizza comes out correctly.”

“Then, where did our pizza recipe go wrong?” Kim asked again.

“That’s the mission we’ll have to figure out. But we’ll have to all work as a secret little team.” Fernandez smiled, “So, who’s in?”

After looking towards Violet and Kim, I knew I could confidently answer for the team, “We’re all in.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dough...Sauce...Cheese...Pizza. Lying on my bed, I was locked in all my thoughts. Even though it was pitch dark, my eyes had been wide open for so many hours that I could see everything through the darkness.

Wait a second. Before we do anything, don’t we have to talk to Spencer? I shuddered. I mean I was completely on deck for saving Human Earth, but Spencer? Spencer was another hurdle to get over.

No, no, Zerd. Remember what Fernandez said: Forgiving isn’t forgetting. Yeah, sure Spencer might not have been the nicest -- I mean, he wasn’t nice, period -- but I mean woah, he was actually crying in front of Mrs. Frown. For the next hour, I battled my thoughts about helping Spencer, until I eventually fell asleep, exhausted from the victory of compassion over revenge.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Zerd, wake up! Zerd!”

I opened my eyes to Fernandez shaking me awake.

“Fernandez? What time is it?”

“6:30. But, remember we planned to meet Violet and Kim before school?”

I yawned, “Oh yeah. Give me a second…” I pulled myself up, and swung my legs to the side of my bed. “Okay, let me wash up real quick.”

“Alright, I’ll be making us a quick breakfast to take to school, so meet me downstairs when you’re ready.”

I quickly washed up in ten minutes or so before making my way down. Being careful not to be too loud, I signaled to Fernandez, “You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s head out!”

As we turned our heads after closing the front door, Fernandez and I saw Violet and Kim approaching from the near distance.

Violet gave a wave, and we returned one, too.

“So, what’s our plan for today?” Kim asked.

“We have to meet with Spencer,” I declared.

“Spencer?”

“Yeah, how are we supposed to help him, if we aren’t talking with him, directly”

“You got a point, Zerds,” Fernandez smiled. “Alright, so we can meet again after school with Spencer, but the goal for you all today is to get Spencer on our team. To see whether we’re working with a mishap in the mozzarella cheese or the larger pizza itself, we need to know more.”

Violet, Kim, and I looked towards each other, and smiled back at Fernandez. “Sounds like a plan -- we’ll start there!”

The lunch bell rang, and we all got ready to begin our mission. Violet and Kim ran towards the classroom door with the rest of the class, and I started walking towards Spencer, who was still sitting at his desk.

“Hey...Spencer?”

Spencer looked up with blank eyes. *Woah, is this really the Spencer that I know?* “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Umm...well...a lot?” I goofily grinned.

Spencer’s eyes began filling with temper, “Look, Zerds. Don’t push it, alright? Just go on your way.”

My grin quickly faded, and I helplessly looked towards Violet and Kim before continuing, “Sorry, Spencer. I didn’t mean to...uh... poke fun, or anything.”

Spencer looked unamused.

“Okay, well the truth is, I know about what’s happening on Human Earth during your transportations,” I blurted.

Spencer’s expression flipped between confusion and anger repeatedly, “What do you *mean*? What do you know, Zerd?”

“Uhhh...everything, basically.”

“I told you, Zerd. I’m not in the mood to…”

“*I’m not joking,* Spencer. Look, this is as hard for me as it is for you, too. It’s not easy to try and offer help to my *nicest* bully, alright?” I pushed back.

Spencer gave a little flinch, and was taken aback.

“Apparently this wandless Shiling wasn’t so useless after all. I have a special power, Spencer.” I motioned for Violet and Kim to slowly begin coming back to the classroom.

“Special power?”

“Yeah, I’m able to receive another Shiling’s Human Earth transportation through my senses?”

Spencer was not having it, “Zerd…”

Violet interrupted, “It’s true, Spencer.”

Kim also gave her chic nod, “Crazy, I know. But it’s true.”

We began explaining all that we had experienced in the past few weeks, and Spencer slowly became more convinced. But he still had his doubts.

“Tell me who else I saw from that glass building.” Spencer demanded.

“Glass building?” I asked.

“Yeah, in that glass building I ran into, escaping the heat.”

“Okay...well begin describing the scene, then.” I closed my eyes, as Spencer narrated his transportation. I carefully looked across from my cool building.

Soon, my eyes widely cracked open, and the blankness that I saw in Spencer’s eyes began to fill mine. “A child...A Human Earth child.”

Shocked, Spencer repeated, “A child?”

“Yeah, a little Human with ragged clothes, and scars...scars across the bare, open skin.”

Spencer’s eyes twinkled with teardrops, “You really see the little Human?”

I softly answered, “Yeah...Yeah, I do.”

The tears dropped, “Did the Human’s eyes catch yours like it caught mine?”

“Yeah...it did.”

Violet and Kim looked over us amidst the sadness and the silence that suddenly shadowed the four of us.

After a couple minutes, Kim did what she did best. “Okay, we can’t sit here forever, and wait for everything to figure out itself.”

Spencer and I raised our heads towards Kim, and she carried on, “We need to help that little Human, and the rest of your Human Earth city, Spencer.”

“How?”

“As a team, and the help of our Level Seven friend: Fernandez.”

“Your brother, Zerd? He knows, too?” Spencer asked.

“Yeah, we didn’t really know who else to ask…” I admitted.

After a moment, Spencer gave a smile, “So, you’re all going to help me?”

Violet chimed in, “Of course, Spencer. As long as you’re okay with it.”

“Okay with it?” Spencer laughed. “Where can I sign up?”

We all burst out laughing, and I announced, “After school, to Fernandez we go!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

While we sat by the old tree behind Academy X after school, we saw a familiar face from the distance.

I waved towards him to come over, “ Hurry, Fernandez! We’re all waiting for you!”

Fernandez’s walk turned into a quick jog, and as he approached, he caught Spencer’s eyes before giving Spencer the biggest smile. “Hey buddy -- nice to see you!”

“Hey, Fernandez! Thanks for… you know… thank you for doing this,” Spencer shyly responded.

Kim snickered before going on to mock Spencer, “*Thank you...Thank you for doing this*.”

Spencer’s unfamiliar shyness quickly faded, and his familiar anger appeared, “Kim, I…”

“Alright, alright.” Fernandez chuckled. “That’s enough. Come on, we all have bigger things to do, right?”

Kim and Spencer instead chose to fight with their deadly stares and glances.

I began, “Since we got Spencer to join the team, we completed your first mission for us. What’s next?”

“Glad to have you here, Spencer.” Fernandez winked towards Spencer. “Well, Spencer was the mozzarella cheese of the pizza, or one of the *local* ingredients. So, let’s start from there! We’ll see what Spencer can do within his city to solve our mystery pizza mistake.”

“Mozzarella cheese?” Spencer asked.

Violet giggled, “Fernandez gave us a quick lesson on the different government levels that Mrs. Frown mentioned in class using pizza! And he was saying that pizza ingredients make up *local* levels of government -- which is what your Human Earth city is like -- and then we have categories for these ingredients, like the dough, sauce, cheese, and toppings -- which is what Kim’s in charge of -- and finally, we put all these categories of ingredients together when we assemble the pizza -- which is what I help out with on Human Earth.”

Spencer slowly nodded. “So, I have to figure out if there’s a problem in the mozzarella cheese because even if we make sure everything is right for you and Kim, if my mozzarella cheese is bad, the whole pizza is bad?”

“Yeah, exactly!”

Fernandez continued, “Yes, so my first thought was to try something called *community-based adaptation*. Big word, I know. But, essentially, we’re going to do just that, Spencer. We’ll figure out if it’s only a problem in the mozzarella cheese, and if it is, then the mozzarella cheese will solve its own problem.”

Our eyes all twinkled with excitement.

“But, we’re a team,” Fernandez reminded. “And, if we want to see if the extreme heat is a problem only in Spencer’s city, we need Kim’s involvement.”

Spencer realized what Fernandez was suggesting. “Wait, yes! In that glass building, I could only see so far across the city because Shilings aren’t allowed to move beyond their Human Earth placement.”

“Exactly!” Fernandez confirmed.

“So, I’m going back tonight?” Kim asked.

“Right now! We’re going to need you to go to Human Earth and figure out where Spencer’s city is.”

“Mission received.” Kim pulled out her wand, “See you all!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After we told our parents that we'll be having dinner and doing schoolwork together late into the night, Spencer, Violet, Fernandez, and I waited anxiously for Kim to return at our local Pickle Diner.

"It's been like five hours since she left. Why isn't she back yet?" I let my thoughts escape into real words.

"Aww Zerds, I'm sure everything's fine. Let's all just wait a little longer." Fernandez tried to reassure us all, but his eyes couldn't fool us. *Fernandez is worried, too.*

As though Kim had heard our worries, she appeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Kim!" shouted Violet.

"Hey -- you all were worried or something?" joked Kim. But it was a joke that she made with an awkward smile. Of all of us, I could see that she looked the most worried.

"Kim...what's wrong?" I asked.

As my eyes met Kim's, I began narrating what she experienced on Human Earth, as though I had experienced it.

Right when I arrived on Human Earth, I could sense something was different from the first time I transported to my region.

To put it in one word, it was HOTTER. I know I landed here last time because I recognize the buildings, but the heat is something I do not recognize. It felt like I was fighting to walk through a thick film of fog. It wasn't like a light and airy fog, but a heavy and living fog.

But, it wasn't the burning heat like Spencer's city, so I could still continue. But, I sensed early on that it wasn't just a mozzarella cheese problem we were dealing with here.

Traveling through my region, I not only felt the heat, but also saw the heat. I saw how the heat affected plants, animals, Humans, and societies.

Harvesting the few crop fields in the unbearable heat were Farmworker Humans. But these Farmworker Humans seemed different. I mean, in my eyes, I saw Humans, but it was almost as though Human Society decided they were different. From time to time, I had to enter the cool air-conditioned glass buildings to take a break, but I knew the Farmworker Humans weren't getting such frequent and nice breaks. And, the Humans in the glass building -- they made me realize that Human Society can tell some Humans to work through a suffocating heat, while other Humans were to work in cool glass buildings.

As I continued through my region, it got hotter. Not, like a five or ten degrees kind of hotter, but like a I-actually-cannot-breathe kind of hotter. Just standing still, I felt beads of sweat forming from every part of my body. I'm not sure if it was the heat or Human Society that removed all the trees and plants, but I couldn't even find patches of shade to escape the cruel sun. But strangely, I saw more and more glass buildings.

But, something else was even more off. While there were more and more glass buildings, not all the buildings were equal. After making some mark, I saw a building close by, and walked towards it -- expecting that same fresh chill to welcome me in. Even though I knew I had walked inside the building because I opened the door to enter inside, I looked back to make sure what I had opened was a door. The door was there,

but so was the heat. No air-conditioning, no cool breeze, nothing. The only protection I got was from the direct sun, but the heat was still there.

Jumping from building to building every minute -- whether it was a hot or cold building -- I didn't give up. And, sure enough, after a few hours, I could see the color "red" in the distance. I thought Spencer was crazy for describing what he saw with a color, but once I saw what he saw, it really was just that: Red.

I forced my eyes open. Silence.

The awkward smile went up at the corners of Kim's mouth, "Well, now we know it might be a bigger cheese problem? Definitely not just a mozzarella problem, that's for sure...and we can't do that *community-based a...uh...adapshun* thing Fernandez talked about."

Fernandez cleared his throat, and also put on that same awkward smile, "Community-based adaptation. Yeah...even if we help all the different cheeses with this plan, I don't think that'll be enough…"

The awkward smile soon faded on them both though, and they joined the drooping heads of Spencer and Violet at the table in our local Pickle Diner.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I broke the silence with the scary truth, "It's getting too hot on Human Earth."

Violet added, "Yeah...and we saw how that was making changes to Human Earth society. The different glass buildings, the Farmworker Humans, the disappearing shade -- it's all happening with the heat."

We were lost -- possibly even defeated. One by one, we looked towards Fernandez in desperate hope, but he had yet to lift his drooping head.

Then, almost like a miracle, someone walked into the local Pickle Diner. Bright rays surrounded him as he made his way in, and I think I seriously even saw sparkles and shimmers around him.

It was Mr. Sunny!

After turning the corner, Mr. Sunny was surprised to see us, “Well, who do we have here! An interesting bunch -- that’s for sure.”

Fernandez finally lifted his head up, as I responded, “Hey, Mr. Sunny. Yeah, not what you might expect, I guess.”

Mr. Sunny continued, “Fernandez! You were here, too?”

“Hi, Mr. Sunny. Yeah...it kind of came to be like that?” Fernandez sheepishly smiled.

A sparkle flickered in Mr. Sunny’s eyes. “Sounds like it was more of a bad reason than a good one?”

Kim blurted out with a sass, “Human Earth is the problem, Mr. Sunny.”

The sparkle quickly dimmed, and he urgently asked, “What do you mean by that?”

We all tried to silently signal Kim’s attention to get her to keep her mouth shut, but no one was going to stop Kim.

“Well, which part of it were you wondering about, Mr. Sunny? The part where Human Earth might basically be on fire? The part where Human Earth Society is saying that some Humans are more special than others? The part where we literally cannot do

anything about it? OH, and have you heard about Zerd's *fantastic* special power -- that's one to hear!"

My jaws dropped, and so did Spencer's, Violet's, and even Fernandez's.

Mr. Sunny paused to take everything in, and tried to continue, "Wow...that's just...wow."

Kim was furious, "*Wow*?? Really, Mr. Sunny?"

"Come on, Kim. Cut me a little slack? I just came in for a late night pickle sandwich, and this is all a little too far from that, wouldn't you agree?"

Kim couldn't stop her smile from escaping. "Alright, Mr. Sunny. But, we're serious. We don't know what to do now."

"Okay, how about this. Let me get myself that pickle sandwich to brace for everything, and while I fuel my brain, you all can tell me what's going on."

"Go get your sandwich, Mr. Sunny. We'll be waiting right here."

And when Mr. Sunny returned, we all took turns talking, filling in any extra details one person may have missed.

After Mr. Sunny finished his last bite of the pickle sandwich, he gulped down some water to clear his throat. "I have good news and bad news. Which would you all like to hear first?"

Spencer shouted, "Good news first, please?"

"Okay, good news first. It's great that you are all here together! Spencer could not have ever solved this problem alone, and I think I have an idea that I couldn't have found a better team to lead."

Spencer continued, "Nice! Wait, so what's the bad news?"

“Umm...the problem you all are dealing with...it’s huge. In my hundred years of teaching, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of something like this happening on Human Earth. And my idea, well, it’s just that, an *idea*. I’m not sure it’s going to work.”

“We’ll make it work, Mr. Sunny. We have to make it work. Believe in us.”

Mr. Sunny’s sparkle returned, “I believe in you all.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Are you serious -- that’s all?” Kim asked.

Mr. Sunny had finished telling us about his idea, and we were not really sure how we should react.

Violet added, “Mr. Sunny, I hope I’m not being too rude, but how is that going to solve everything?”

Mr. Sunny firmly responded, “You’re not.”

This time, Fernandez spoke, “What do you mean, Mr. Sunny?”

“You’re not going to be like the famous movie stars. Movie stars, like Super Shiling, are just that -- characters living in a made-up superhero world.”

Fernandez continued, “But, Mr. Sunny, we’re supposed to help save Human Earth. Isn’t the biggest mission of Shilings to protect the Human Environment?”

“You’re right in that we are supposed to help protect the Human Environment, Fernandez, but you’re wrong in thinking that we are supposed to *save* Human Earth. You see, there is no place for Shilings to come into Human Earth, and use magic or superhero powers to make Human Earth ‘normal’ again.”

Kim bursted, “So, even if Human Earth is burning, we let it burn? Is that what you want us to do?”

“Well, we help to make sure that Human Earth never burns. But, in the case that it does start burning, Shilings cannot make a miracle happen. Human Earth is *Human* Earth. It is not *Shiling* Earth. Ultimately, Humans have to make their own miracle.”

Silence. Confusion, anger, disappointment, sadness, pain -- there were too many emotions and thoughts.

Mr. Sunny’s idea was to -- simply put -- work as a team. Spencer would go to Human Earth, and engage with Humans in his local city. I would help Spencer tell the team what he learned. Next, Kim would go to Human Earth, and engage with Humans in the region of Spencer’s city. I would help Kim tell the team what she learned. Then, Violet would go to Human Earth, and engage with Humans at the national level. I would help Violet tell the team what she learned.

The end result? Mr. Sunny called it a *multi-governance* policy that Humans were to put in place, *not* Shilings. Basically, a pizza policy -- not a cheese policy or dough policy -- but an entire pizza policy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fast forward three months, we were at the last day of Level One in Academy X. To graduate Level One, we have to pass the final group presentation. And, our group was the last to present.

Mrs. Frown proudly announced, “And, finally, we have Zerd, Kim, Violet, and Spencer who will be presenting.”

I began, “Hello, everyone. Today, we are going to present about…”

And, throughout our presentation, we talked on the importance of collaboration, empowerment, and urgency. Climate change is real. When Mr. Sunny told us that we couldn’t be superheroes, he meant that climate change would not magically disappear. Humans have a responsibility, and Shilings help to support this responsibility, but they cannot complete this responsibility.

Kim continued, “And, we helped to put in place the multi-governance policy -- the pizza policy, we like to call it -- with Humans…”

Mr. Sunny was right. Human Earth is not a made-up world, where the superhero comes in to save each climate crisis. But, Mr. Sunny also later told us that because Human Earth is not a made-up world, every Human has the potential to become a superhero.

Violet noted, “We were challenged, and often had to go beyond the teachings of Level One…”

Fernandez and Mr. Sunny had taught us that there is not only so much to learn past Level One, but also so much to learn outside Academy X. We’ll learn more in Level Two, than we did in Level One; more in Level Three, than we did in Level Two. But, even after finishing Level Seven, we needed to learn on our own -- that is, beyond Academy X.

Spencer concluded, “Climate crises are affecting the lives of too many, but they are also affecting the lives of particular groups…”’

We all knew this. Earlier in the school year, Francesca had brought up a pizza example when Mrs. Frown talked to us about inequalities, and the example was too

real. If ten Humans were to share a pizza box, the same seven Humans are guaranteed a pizza slice, some slices even bigger than what can be finished, while the other Humans are to go hungry.

If ten Humans are in the same region or even the same city, the seven Humans would be guaranteed a comfortable and cool glass building -- even colder than is necessary -- while the others are to be left in the burning heat.

The pizza policy is a start, but it cannot be the end.

When I first realized I was a "wandless Shiling," I felt devastated… betrayed… worthless. I didn't know what purpose I held in either the Shiling world or Human Earth. But, now I think I have one of the most important roles any Shiling or Human can have, and that is to be able to see Human Earth as a whole -- to see Human Earth through its past, present, and future. While each Shiling lives seeing their own Human Earth city, region, state, or country, I can see through these quite meaningless borders that Humans made. Climate change does not confine itself to these borders. And it's not just the physical or geographical barriers, but it's also the social, cultural, and historical barriers that we have to break through. Mr. Sunny was right, Shilings can't possibly come in, and change the entire structure of how Human Earth is run -- that's not the responsibility of Shilings, it's the responsibility of Humans. If each Human has the opportunity to be the superhero I always wanted to be on Human Earth, then what is every Human waiting for -- let's begin making the pizza!