

A slap in the face

I wanted to cry so badly, but I had to stay strong. Aryx and his friends found me in the arcade hall, my safe place, where the slot machines are lined up next to each other and lighten the room with their colourful lights. The boys pushed me against the old slot machine that nobody uses, twice, which is the reason why I was laying on the ground. "We are just trying to have some fun with you, aren't you enjoying it?", Aryx said with a sneaky grin and burst out laughing with the others. Aryx and I were best friends in elementary school. But when everyone in high school started to pick on me because of my looks, he started to distance himself and even began to bully me too. A tear ran down my face, they drove me insane! "Geez Elias, you're such a crybaby.", Aryx mumbled and gave me his hand to help me up. After some hesitation, I took it, which turned out to be a bad decision. He tried to push me again, but he tripped. Due to that, we both fell against the old slot machine and Aryx's elbow pressed on play by accident. At a single blow the game absorbed us and we fell from the sky.

We both groaned when we dropped on the ground. "Where...where are we?", Aryx stammered. I looked around and shrugged. "I don't know... wait do you remember that legend, where people get absorbed into machines and mysteriously just come back to life? I think, that is exactly what is happening to us.", I said. Aryx simply looked at me, as if he thinks that I'm crazy. Abruptly a sign popped up in front of us, Aryx read out loud: "At the end of one of these paths is a portal, that leads you back to the normal world. Choose wisely." Suddenly a fork that led to two different forests appeared. The left one was quite fairytale-like. Snow-white bunnies were hopping around and cats with soft-looking fur were laying in the grass under the hot sun. Furthermore the sturdy, handsome trees filled the dreamy forest with their rose blossoms. In the distance, you could even see a waterfall. I don't know if I was just being paranoid, but something felt off about this route. In my eyes it was too perfect I guess. The dark forest on the right looked abandoned. It had some single, tall, dead trees with a couple of pitch-black ravens flying around through the heavy fog. "I think we should take the right path", I said. Aryx gave me a dirty look, "Are you insane? That forest looks dangerous as hell! The portal must be at the waterfall, I'm sure about that", he says and took the left path with an overconfident walk. I didn't know what to do. After some thought, I ended up following Aryx. When I regretfully looked to my right, the sombre forest faded away and at the same moment, a scratchy voice whispered in my ear "Good luck, you'll need it."

With every step I took on the multicoloured pathway, the more I got visibly uncomfortable. Not because the location looked like it was vomited on by a unicorn, no...more because I blamed myself for not trusting my gut. I guess Aryx perceived my inner unrest "Elias, I really can't tell what your problem is, this place is harmless, just like in a tale. We'll get back to the real world soon, just as you said.", Aryx assured me. He does know that not every tale has a happy end, right? He lifted up a lizard and held it in my face "See, it's non-threatening." Unexpectedly the lizard opened its mouth and bit me in my nose. "Ouch!", I screamed, I was bleeding briskly. Thereupon Aryx threw it away. "It probably just needed some physical touch...", he said quite nervously. The lizard whimpered while tossing about, it seemed to be in pain too. All of a sudden, I heard loud footsteps approaching us from behind, so I turned around. Exactly when I thought things couldn't get any worse, a giant, angry alligator surfaced right behind us. It's wore an armour and held sharp axes while walking on its hind legs. "RUN!", I hollered and ran away. Aryx though, wasn't listening. He just stood there as

stiff as a statue. "I...I can't.", he stuttered. The alligator had already reached him, poised to slaughter people. The alligator grabbed Aryx by his shirt and raised its axe to close in for the kill. Aryx started to wet himself, which his awful, tight, khaki shorts made very clear. In that moment I asked myself, if I should help him, if he was even worth it, after everything he did to me. Unexpectedly Aryx confessed to me while sobbing: "I'm sorry for all I've done, I don't know what has gotten into me. I guess when everyone started to harass you in high school, I wanted to prevent turning into a target too, but I've realised that it wasn't right", his eyes were puffy from crying, "please forgive me, you are my best friend." The second I heard these last words, I took a stone and threw it in the eyes of the alligator. It immediately dropped Aryx so I grabbed him and we ran away along the track. After we've escaped the alligator, we finally arrived at the waterfall. The path ended here but, there was no portal in sight. "Do you think the portal is down there", Aryx said slowly. I looked down, we were very high over the water "There is just one way to find out.", I responded. Before he could say anything, I jumped off the cliff. I fell faster and faster and got closer and closer to the water. Suddenly, a big red cross appeared on the water surface and I closed my eyes, I knew it, it really was the wrong path. This must be the end then.

When I opened my eyes again, I sat on the ground next to Aryx. His friends and the storekeeper stand in front of us completely flabbergasted. The storekeeper held the plug of the old slot machine and uttered: "So the rumours really are true". After a minute of silence, one of Aryx friends asked him: "Why are your pants wet?" Aryx answered straight away: "Elias vomited on me twice, he's so gross." Now that one caught me off guard. I was disappointed and angry. I had believed his words. However, I just stood up and left the arcade hall.

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