

CHAPTER 0



Mostly Lost

Lauren Ipsum had been lost in the woods all morning. The poor girl didn't know where she was or where she was going.

It had all started with an argument. Her mother wanted her to go to summer school, and naturally Laurie didn't want to go. "Children in other countries go to school year round," her mom said. "We aren't in other countries," Laurie replied. "Extra classes are how to get ahead," Mom said. "Summer is for having fun," Laurie insisted. The argument went on and on and got loud near the end. To calm down, Laurie took a walk in the woods.

When people are faced with something they don't want to do, they often do something they aren't allowed to do instead. Before long, Laurie had gone farther into the woods than she had ever gone before.

Being lost was kind of fun. Out here, Laurie could be anything she wanted to be, and there was no one to tell her different.

She was a secret ninja, moving like a ghost through the ancient forest. Light and shadow danced under the leaves, and she danced with them. No one could hear her stealthy ninja footsteps. No one would see her coming until it was too—

“Chiguire!” said a voice up ahead. A shape came toward her out of the darkness. Was it an angry spirit? A dire beast?

“Argot!” the creature said. It was like a mouse-dog, or a dog-mouse. That is to say, it was the size of a dog, but it looked more like a mouse. It walked right up to Laurie and began nuzzling her hand in a very un-beast-like way.

“Aw, you’re so friendly!” Laurie said, in a rather un-ninja-like fashion.

“Repl!” it said, as it put a webbed foot on her knee.

“You’re a funny-looking thing, aren’t you? What’s your name, huh? What should I call you?”

“Argot!”

“Okay, I’ll call you Argot. Are you hungry? What do . . . things like you eat?” She offered it some peanuts.

“Snarfl!” it snarflled, eating out of her hand.

“Hey, little guy,” she said, tickling its chin, “you don’t know the way back to Hamilton, do you?”

“Hamilton!” it said excitedly.

“You do know a way?”

“Lalr!” it lalred, tongue hanging out.

“So where is it?”

“Isit!” it said.

“I mean, how do I get there?”

“Gether!” it answered.

“You’re just repeating what I’m saying, aren’t you?”

“Arentyou!” it said.



“That’s what I thought. Animals can’t talk.”

So now I’m lost, Laurie thought to herself. *How do I get unlost?* She remembered something about moss growing on the north side of trees. There wasn’t any moss, so that was out. *The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.* It was late morning, and the sun was almost overhead. No help there either.

She wandered around, flipping her lucky red poker chip. If the chip landed on heads, she walked to the left for a while. If it landed on tails, she walked to the right for a while.

“*Burble . . .*” Argot waddled behind her, making nonsense noises.

“No, don’t follow me, Argot. Shoo!”

“*Bitblit?*”

“I like you, but I’m not allowed to have a dog. Or a mouse, or a dog-mouse, or whatever you are. Go along now—go home!”

No matter what she said, the ugly little thing wouldn’t give up. It seemed willing to follow Laurie all the way to . . . wherever she was going.

Maybe if I wait for the stars to come out, she thought to herself. *No, that’s silly. I don’t know which stars are which!*

“*Frobit!*” Another creature like Argot, but bigger, came out of the underbrush. It tried to lick her face.

“Ugh, your breath stinks!”

“*Wibble!*” A third creature came up from behind and butted its head against her.

“Whoops! Hello to you, too.”

“*Tanstaaf!*”

“*Zork!*”

More creatures were coming from all directions. The noise was getting louder.

“Uh,” Laurie uhhed.

“Parsec!”

“Wurfl!”

“Lilo!”

Argot’s friends were no longer just nuzzling. They were crowding all around her, pushing and shouting. She was being mobbed.

Laurie panicked and ran. The gang of creatures howled and chased after her.

“Nyquist!”

“Quux!”

“Fifo!”

She could barely stay on her feet, running through the tangled underbrush, but she was too afraid to slow down.

Her escape was blocked by a tall green hedge that stretched in both directions. Once upon a time it might have been part of a garden, but now it was wild and disorderly. Laurie squeezed her way through a gap in the hedge and kept running until she thought she was safe. The creatures were far behind.

The forest looked different on the other side of the hedge. For one, the trees had red and black stripes. Black tree trunks split into two red branches. Those split into four black branches, which split into eight red branches, and on and on, until the branches ended in millions of tiny black leaves. In fact . . .

“Foo!”

“Bar!”

“Baz!”

The creatures were still chasing her! Laurie tried to run away again, but she couldn’t go very fast. Her throat was raw, and her legs were beginning to tremble.