

PAIGE NOT FOUND

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CHAPTER

ONE

Paige watches the timer on the microwave, its golden glow the only thing illuminating the tiny kitchen. Her nightly hot chocolate rotates painfully slow in her mom's *Bob's Burgers* mug. With two seconds to spare, Paige hits the button to open the door. She hates the squawking beeping sound it makes when it's done, but more than that, she doesn't want her dad to know she's still awake. It is a school night, after all, and he's in the living room working on his laptop.

Sneaking into the kitchen to get her pre-bedtime chocolate fix was risky, sure, but she won't be able to sleep without it. First, she has at least two more hours of gaming to do.

Walking on her tiptoes, Paige hurries back to her bedroom with her mug, closes the door gently behind

her, and begins the process of getting cozy. She places her hot chocolate on her bedside table, just under her lamp that's on the lowest dimmer setting, then crawls into bed under two weighted blankets, propping herself up against pillows. Then she slips on her noise-canceling headphones, pulls her laptop onto her lap, and dives back into *Realm of Wonders* to the sound of Mara in her ears.

“KingPaige’s back! We ready?”

And with that, Paige disappears into the game, leaving the real world behind.

In the moonlit woods, a coven forms a line at the gates of a towering stone castle. Paige (KingPaige) has been working all night for this moment. It's a miracle she and Mara (MarLord) even found other players willing to join them on this level at such late notice, but now they have the clues, the spell ingredients, everything they need to take down the Serpent.

Or *almost* everything.

“Where’s your wand?” KingPaige asks the warlock to her left.

“Oh, sorry,” the warlock says. He pulls out his wand. “Got it!”

The delay costs them. MarLord gets swept up by a swamp monster, its green tentacles squeezing her so hard her witch’s hat falls to the ground.

Paige presses a few buttons on her laptop frantically,

trying to save her. Other members of the coven yell at her to stop, to leave her behind. But Mara is her best friend—IRL, not just in the game. They never leave each other behind. They don't betray each other like that.

Purple smoke rises all around KingPaige, blocking her sight. She pulls a Starlight Orb out of her satchel and throws it into the air, pointing her wand at it. Everything goes white.

“Paige!” Mara’s voice yells in her ear. She flinches. “That was too much! Now none of us can see!”

All around KingPaige, havoc breaks loose. The elves and warlocks in the coven are killed off one by one. KingPaige is the last to fall, but she hardly notices. She’s too busy cringing as the other players yell at her for ruining the game.

Game over.

Mara sighs. “Paige, you always do this. We’ll never find a permanent coven to join if you keep going off on your own.”

Paige starts to defend herself, but there’s a knock at the door on Mara’s end. “What are you still doing up?” she hears Mara’s mom yell through her headphones. “It’s almost midnight!”

“Sorry, Paige,” Mara says. “Gotta go. Next time, remember—*Teamwork makes the dream work!*”

An alert pops up on Paige’s screen. *MarLord has*

exited the Realm. Paige does the same before the rest of the squad can yell at her some more for getting them all disintegrated.

Rats. They were *this close* to taking down the Serpent. But then again, they are always *this close*, and then it goes wrong. Mara would say it's usually because of something Paige did. But it's not Paige's fault she gets good ideas, or that she's quick to act in a crisis. It's called *leadership*, thank you very much.

A yawn escapes her. She should probably go to bed. It's a school night and her mom will be home from her shift at the hospital any minute. If she sees Paige is still up, she'll get yelled at like Mara did.

Paige closes her laptop and heads for the bathroom. When she emerges, bladder empty and eyes tired, she hears her dad's snores coming from the living room. Clawdia, her fiery orange cat, is probably in there with him. Paige never goes to bed without Clawdia by her side. She tiptoes in, and yep, there's Clawdia, a ball of tangerine fur curled at her dad's feet.

"Pss! Clawdia!" Paige whispers, but Clawdia doesn't move. She's about to bend down to pick her up when something pings so loud it makes Paige jump.

Her dad's laptop screen lights up with an email notification. She catches a glimpse of the subject line.

Paige Wells Daily Report.

Hub? What is a daily report, and why is Paige's dad getting one about her?

Her dad is fast asleep. She can take a quick look. Paige clicks on the email and it opens up pages of colorful charts, numbers, and what looks like a scan of her brain. She keeps looking through and finds a map of her neighborhood in Queens. It's dotted with little red pins—school, the library, the bodega down the block. Paige frowns. Those are all places she went today.

Is her dad tracking her? Why would he do that? Paige knows they don't talk much, but she thought he trusted her.

Could this be some kind of joke? She knows people like to do pranks on April Fool's Day—a day that seems mean and confusing to her—but it's September. Besides, she doesn't understand what could be funny about any of this. Though sometimes she takes longer to understand jokes than other people. But no, this can't be a joke. Her dad doesn't even know she's seeing it.

She flicks her wrists and then scrolls down some more, finding a list titled *Paige Wells's Vitals*. It shows her heart rate throughout the day, blood sugar levels—which spiked around the time she drank that bodega soda—and how many steps she took. There are some words she's heard of but doesn't fully understand. *Cortisol*. *Dopamine*. *Serotonin*. And one she is very familiar with: *anxiety*. She knows that word because a doctor diagnosed her with it almost two years ago, just after her tenth birthday.

The chart on the screen says her anxiety levels rose five times today. Paige looks at the times, and they all happened while she was at school. No surprise there. She looks more closely at the five spikes in anxiety and notices a little green arrow next to each one. She clicks one arrow, and text appears. *Serotonin Boost Initiated*. What does that mean?

There's no time to find out, because the gate to their brownstone squeaks outside. Her mom is home. It will only take a minute for her to climb up the stairs and walk through the door of their apartment. Paige clicks the button to forward the email to herself but hesitates. It's wrong to snoop in other people's private business. But this email is about her, so technically it counts as her business, right? Oh, she's so confused! Clawdia purrs next to Paige as she quickly forwards the email to her own address, then goes into her dad's sent folder and deletes the evidence. She doesn't know what this is all about, but she's determined to find out.

The old stairs in the hall creak as her mom gets closer. Paige picks up Clawdia and hurries toward her bedroom, but she's not fast enough. Her mom stands in the open doorway, in her scrubs, glaring at her.

Paige flashes her mom her biggest smile. "Mommy!"

"Don't even," she says, shaking her head. She slams the door shut, waking Paige's dad up with a start.

"Huh? What?" He rubs his eyes. "Oh, hi, honey."

Paige's mom points at him, her keys still jangling in her hand. "Don't you 'honey' me. You're supposed to make sure she goes to bed at a decent time. Her therapist said she needs structure and routine."

Paige hates when they talk about her like she's not there. Especially when they bring up things her therapist said. All three of them seem to think she's a baby.

"Sorry," her dad says. "I was working late. I must've dozed off."

Paige's mom takes her phone out of her jacket pocket and holds it out to him. "While you were napping, Paige was playing her game with Mara until about five minutes ago. Her mom texted me."

Oh crap. This isn't good. Mrs. Greenberg isn't just Mara's mom, she's also the principal of Paige's school. Paige is not exactly an A-plus student, so Principal Greenberg already thinks she's a bad influence on Mara. If Paige makes her mad enough she could easily convince her parents to send her to, *gulp*, summer school.

Paige's dad gives her the look. He reserves it for special occasions like this, when she has really screwed up. His eyebrows pinch together, his mouth presses so tight his lips practically disappear, and his nostrils flare. It's the "I'm not mad, I'm disappointed" look, though she's pretty sure he's mad this time, too.

He holds his hand out. "Give me your phone."

Clawdia meows and jumps out of her arms. Coward.
“My phone? No!”

“Yes, Paige,” her mom says. “Hand it over. Your laptop, too. All your gadgets are off-limits.”

Paige crosses her arms over her chest. “They’re in my room.”

Her mom crosses her arms over her chest, too. “Then go get them.”

Paige lets out a huff and storms into her room, collects her laptop and phone, then brings them out and hands them over. “How long are you keeping them for?”

Her mom shrugs. “Until you show a little more responsibility.”

“But what about school? I need my laptop to do homework!”

Paige really thinks that will work, but her mom has come to this fight prepared.

“Use the computer lab at school,” she says.

Paige stomps her foot, not even caring how childish it makes her look. “All I did was play a video game for a few hours!”

Her dad shakes his head. “Don’t act like this is the first time we’ve had this discussion.”

“It’s never a discussion,” Paige says. Her throat starts to burn. She swallows back the feeling, trying her hardest not to cry. “What am I supposed to do without my phone?”

Her dad laughs. “Read! Go outside! Have an actual conversation with someone! Be a normal kid!”

Normal? Paige’s heart plummets into her stomach.

“David!” her mom scolds him, but it’s too late. He said it. The damage is done. And Paige can’t hold her tears back anymore. She knows kids at school think that being autistic means she’s not normal, but she never thought her parents felt the same way.

Her dad takes a step closer to her, and she backs away.

“Paige,” he tries. “That’s not what I meant. You’re normal. I just meant . . . be social.”

Paige wants to say that she *is* social. She talks to Mara all the time. But he wants her to have a whole bunch of friends, like he did when he was her age. He’s always telling stories about how he and his buddies would go skateboarding after school and to parties every weekend and ride the subway down to Coney Island in the summer. Paige has friends online, friends that know her better than her parents do. For some reason that doesn’t count. Nothing she does counts.

But Paige doesn’t say any of that. She doesn’t know how to get those words out. So she turns around and walks into her bedroom, with Clawdia following behind. They snuggle under the weighted blankets, and Paige cries into her fur.

The word *normal* echoes in her mind. Somewhere deep down inside, Paige was afraid of this. That her dad

wishes she was different, more outgoing, more like him. She didn't mind so much that he never seems to understand her, the way her mind works, because he always tries. But this just seems to confirm that in the end, he'll always want her to be someone she isn't, and that hurts her more than anything.

Paige always thought parents were supposed to be on their kids' team. But right now Paige feels like she doesn't have a team. It's just her.