

MAX'S ESCAPE FROM PLANET MARI-TOE

DAY ZERO

"It's the best present ever!" Max was confiding to his best friend AJ—AKA Augustine Jeffrey—at the close of the final class of the last day of school. "It's this handheld video game thing, and in it I'm stranded on Planet Mari-Toe, and I need to search for parts to repair my spaceship and save my crew so I can return to Earth. I have to go through forests and jungles and swamps. It's *so* dangerous, but there are these special items I collect that help me not lose my air supply so I won't die! It'll probably take me all summer to get back to Earth."

Max glanced at AJ to see if he was listening. AJ, however, was focused on Mrs. Castle, their teacher, who had just returned bearing leaflets with SUMMER CAMP printed in large letters on the front pages.

Max paused from his mental preparations for escaping from Planet Mari-Toe to listen to Mrs. Castle.

"I received permission slips from your parents for our weeklong summer camp at Lake Hottamo. These pamphlets I'm passing out include a list of what you'll need to pack, our camp schedule, an activities list, game rules, and a list of sites on Lake Hottamo and

other camping essentials. These are to be read *before* our excursion. Our class will be 'Group Moki,' and you'll be led by Mr. Cook and me."

"Hurrahs" echoed throughout Mrs. Castle's classroom. Mr. Cook, their gym teacher, was a student favorite.

"Please bring everything on the packing list, and be here on Tuesday, at 8 a.m. sharp, in front of the school entrance. Stragglers will be left behind," said Mrs. Castle rather gleefully, or so Max thought—until his thoughts filled with spaceships and laser-beam guns and other more pressing matters.



As Max walked home, he did not notice the sun turning his neck and shoulders pink, or his favorite ice-cream stand with a special last-day-of-school deal, or even the odd cat wearing roller skates. He was thinking of how to get through the treacherous swamplands of Planet Mari-Toe. He was sure one of the missing pieces to his spacecraft lay in the heart of Swampy Swampland, but he had received warning messages whenever he neared that area that toad-like aliens liked to snack on ten-year-old boys' toes...

Wait! Was someone talking to him? ...

"Max, wanna go through that camp-prep reading list with me?"

Max blinked and looked around.

"Oh, AJ! It's you," Max was very relieved. "I thought you might be something else."

AJ sighed loudly. "I've been walking with you this whole way."

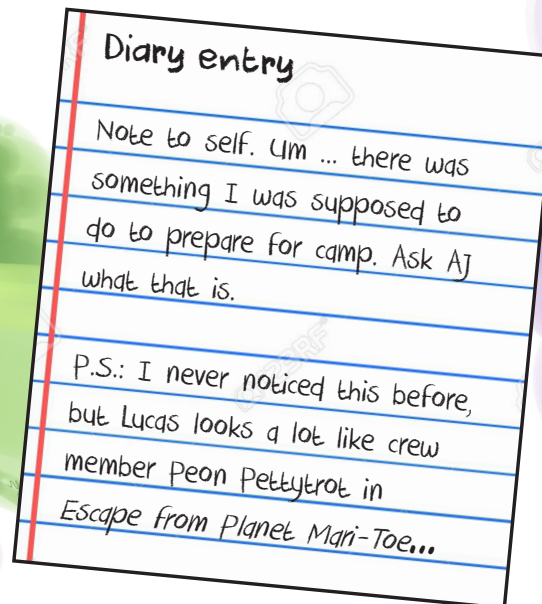
"You have?" asked Max, quite astonished.

AJ rolled his eyes. "I'll ask Lucas if he wants to be my study partner. See you on Tuesday."

At the mention of Lucas' name, Max stopped walking and turned to give AJ his full attention. "Lucas?!"

But AJ had already turned the corner on his street and had disappeared from sight.

Max's eyes narrowed. *If that Lucas wants to steal my best friend, he better know nothing can come between AJ and me. ...* This thought drifted away as Max walked into his bedroom a few minutes later, every bit of himself pulled toward his videogame console. He dropped his school bag at the entrance of his room, kicked off his shoes, then stretched out in the middle of the floor and focused on getting his beloved spacecraft out of Planet Mari-Toe with all his fingers and toes intact.



THE CAMPFIRE

This camping trip has not started off well, Max admitted to himself as he helped unload bags from the school bus. There had been three days to prepare for the camping trip, but he had been busy with important things, like escaping from Planet Mari-Toe. And it was only early this morning that he had dug out his what-to-pack list and threw what he hoped was everything into his gym bag. He hadn't looked up any of the sites on Mrs. Castle's reading list, but AJ probably had. He was glad Mrs. Castle had put them together as buddies for the summer camp even if AJ was being all huffy about Max's lack of preparation.

On the bright side, I did find that missing engine piece in the Swampy Swamplands, and I made it through Fierce Forest, and I'm just minus one toe! Max had brought his video game console with him. Though he was not allowed to use it even once at the campsite, he wanted to keep it close by. Seven days was *too* long to be apart from rescuing his spacecraft—though it'd be time well spent developing strategy, even if only in his mind, to make it through the next bit of treacherous terrain: the Deadly Desert.

"Max!" hissed AJ. "You're doing that blank stare again!"

"I am?"

"What you're *supposed* to be doing is helping me pitch our tent, and then we're to collect kindling for the after-dinner campfire!"

"Er, right." Max looked at the pile of metal rods and synthetic fabric. *How was this supposed to turn into a tent?* He glanced around at the other buddies and their almost-finished tents. "Hmm. Yep, this is supposed to turn into a tent," he observed.

"You didn't read anything on the reading list, did you?" AJ sounded exasperated, and Max felt guilty.



"I-I..." began Max.

"It's fine," said AJ in a way that told Max it was not fine at all. "You collect the kindling for the fire, and I'll do the tent."

Max hesitantly turned toward the line of trees some yards from the campsite. He was pretty sure this kind of kindling had nothing to do with his older sister's much-loved e-book reader, and that it helped with building fires, but outside of that he didn't know what he should be collecting. Now, on Planet Mari-Toe if he even got two steps near anything that would help him survive, his spacesuit would automatically suck that "goodie" into his arsenal. Also, in one of his forays into Fierce Forest, he had collected a special fire-starting power...



“Need help?”

Max turned around, “Uh hey, Lucas.”

“Kindling is the small dry twigs that burn fast and help to get the logs burning.”

Max hastily dropped the leaves and wild flowers he had been absently picking.

“Yeah, I knew that.”

Lucas grinned. “Uh, huh. Okay, well, see ya’.”

Max watched Lucas head away with his basket. *Maybe Lucas isn't so bad after all,* thought Max. And then, realizing that here was his chance to get back on AJ's good side, he got busy.

AJ was appeased when Max brought him the basket filled with kindling, and together they placed the dried twigs under the large logs laid at the center of the fireplace pit. And just in time, too. Dinner was a feast of barbecued hotdogs, corn on the cob, and potatoes baked in tinfoil, after which all the Mokians marched over to sit around the campfire that was now at a steady blaze.

Mrs. Castle began Campfire Time by reading the various activities and games that would be held over the course of the next week, and the duties of each of the buddy teams. AJ and Max were assigned to pick up trash from around Group Moki's tents and fireplace every morning after breakfast. On the day after tomorrow, Group Moki would face Group Akeli, the other half of the fourth and fifth graders from Winston Elementary School, for a much-anticipated game of Capture the Flag. A trophy would go to the winning team!



And then it was Mr. Cook's turn to begin an old campfire tradition. “Once upon a time, a very long time ago...” said Mr. Cook in his best spooky voice. The fire cast strange shadows on Mr. Cook's face, and all the Mokians huddled close together. “There lived a strange fungus in the forest near Lake Hottamo,” and all the Mokians groaned. “And on a certain day, this strange fungus realized that—Mrs. Castle?” And so the storytelling game went. At a most exciting part, someone's name would be called and he or she would continue the story until the next person's name was called, and on and on the story would go.



At turns the strange fungus turned into a dog, and then a cat, and then became a nice old lady, who had grandchildren, and then ... “Max!”

Fortunately, Max knew exactly how this story should end. He stood up, “The old lady who had been a fungus, and who had turned into a dog and then into a cat and finally an old lady was *actually* an alien who had become so many different things in order to find the spare parts for his spaceship so he could return home! And now he was ready! His spaceship was complete! He returned home! And that’s the end!”

Max lowered his arms and sat back down to a very loud silence.

Mrs. Castle cleared her throat. “A most original ending. Thank you, Max.”

The campfire had faded to a soft flicker, and Mr. Cook stood up and stretched. “Well, I suppose it is rather late. Let’s call it a night. Don’t be too scared to walk to your tents, fellow Mokians. And beware of strange fungi!”

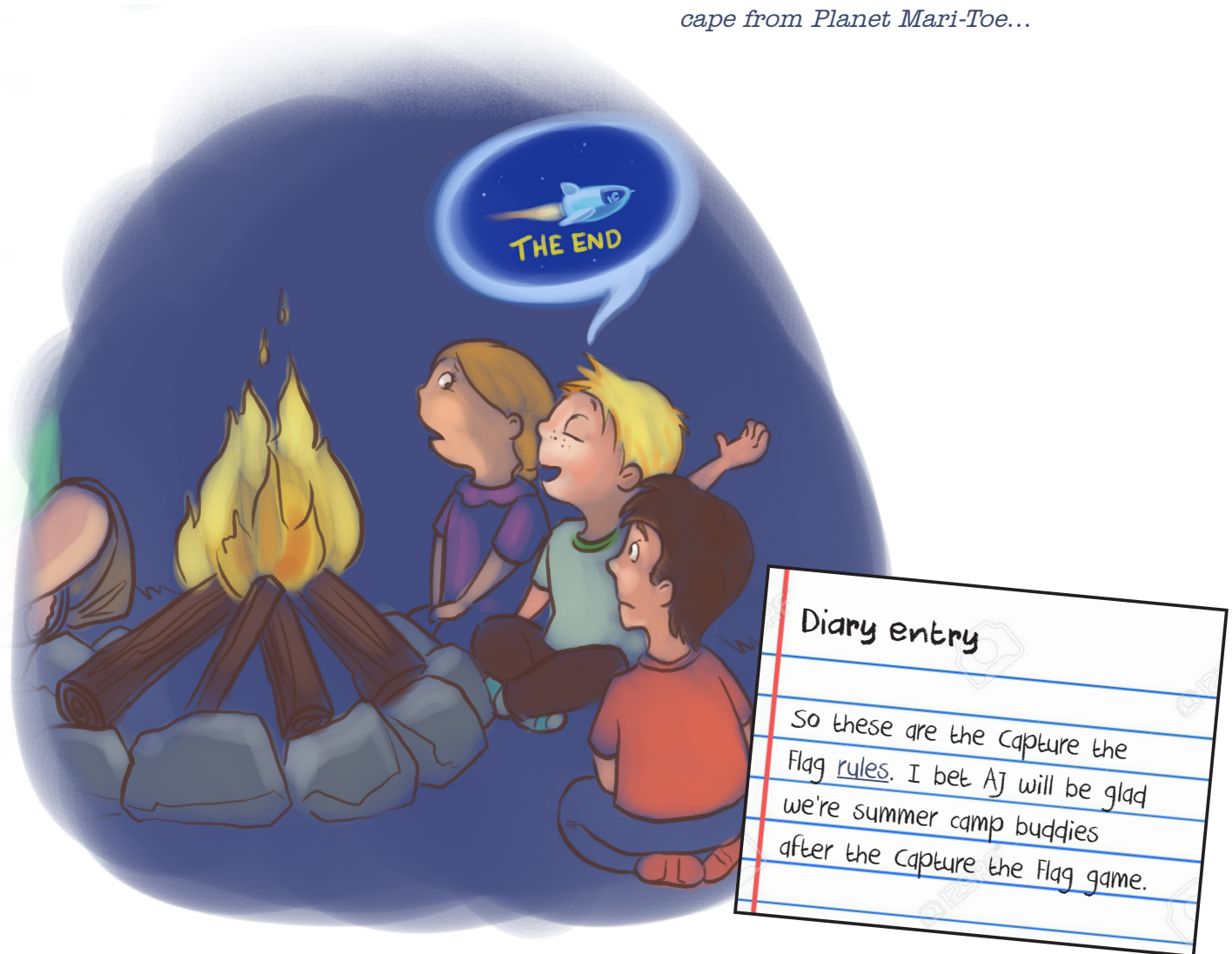
“You ended the story,” said AJ as they both walked the short distance to their tent. “You didn’t even give me a turn.”

Max kept his eyes on the tips of his shoes. He hadn’t meant to end the story, except that it had seemed too perfect to keep to himself.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow, I promise.”

“It’s fine,” said AJ gruffly. “Just promise you’ll study the Capture the Flag rules tomorrow.”

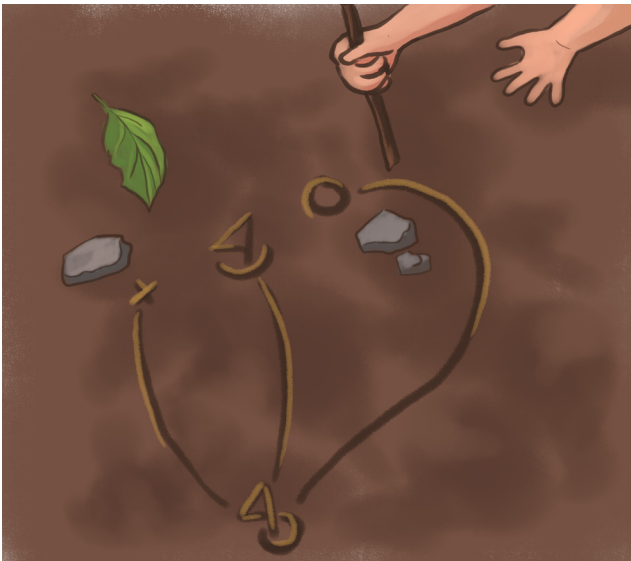
“Oh, I will!” said Max, quite relieved AJ wasn’t too upset with him after all. He’d make it up to AJ. After all, he had developed such fine strategy from playing *Escape from Planet Mari-Toe*...



CAPTURE THE FLAG

Group Moki huddled around a tall pine providing shade from the high summer sun. Their team's red flag hung limply from a pole a hundred feet away.

"We need decoys to go out *here* and *here* so that Lucas can sneak around the back and make a go for their flag." Captain AJ was etching their strategy onto the ground with a stick. "Max, you can be one of the decoys."



"What? But I'm *so* good at being sneaky!" shouted Max. Startled birds flew out of the tree, a few insects scrambled away, and Max continued in a quieter voice. "Like in *Escape from Planet Mari-Toe*, there are all these aliens and swamp monsters and creepy crawlers, but I've only lost one toe so far! That's super good. That's a record! I could tell you about the time I turned into a fly so no one would guess I was actually a space captain! I can't be a ... a ... *decoy*!"

AJ looked up from where he was crouching over Group Moki's strategy, and then he looked around at his classmates, who were all waiting for the game to begin. "Fine. *I'll* be the decoy. You and Clarence stay here and guard the flag."

Before Max could raise another protest, a shrill whistle sounded and the game commenced. Max looked around at his dispersing classmates. They all had Group Moki's signature color, red, tied onto their arm or around their heads. He'd never seen them this focused before. So, okay, the winning group would get the Capture the Flag trophy to display in their classroom for the rest of the year, and extra-extra-large marshmallows at campfire tonight, *and* a

little badge for each member of the winning team, and boasting rights till next year's summer camp. But really, it wasn't *that* big a deal. Max trudged over to where he was supposed to stand and guard the flag.

You know, if AJ would listen to me, he'd know I'm really good at this sort of thing. And why did he have to go and pick Lucas of all people. Max's eyes narrowed. AJ is supposed to be MY best friend. Why, if we were on Planet Mari-Toe, I wouldn't forget about my friends like AJ is...



The day before, Group Moki had gone fishing in Lake Hottamo. For some reason AJ had spent most of the time catching fish with Lucas because Lucas had “better fishing strategy.” Max had good fishing strategy too. Of course, it involved some Wii fishing moves he had learned, and it wasn’t his fault Lake Hottamo fish didn’t recognize good moves when they saw them. For some reason this camping trip wasn’t turning out as he had hoped. And it definitely wasn’t as much fun as he had remembered last year’s camp to be. He wished AJ would listen to his ideas. But most of all, he missed playing and talking with his best friend....

Max’s eyes were trained on AJ, who was now stepping into the little stream that was the boundary line between Group Mokian land and Group Akelian land. Off to the side, a bush moved and rustled, then went still. Max went on full alert. *It was an Akelian trying to catch AJ.*

“AJ! Watch out!” yelled Max.

A yellow-banded Akelian leapt out of the bushes, making a run to capture AJ, but AJ had gotten a head start from Max’s warning and sprinted across the border not a moment too soon.

Max exhaled. AJ turned and waved at Max. Max grinned. Why, he hadn’t known he had super eagle eyes! As AJ headed out again, Max paid closer attention to the bushes and the trees surrounding the flag and the boundary line. And there was another Akelian! He raised the alert, and his land was safe. Over the next hour Max warned his fellow Mokians of intruders on their land, and he and fellow flag guard Clarence successfully guarded their flag from Akelians.

A whistle sounded. The game was over. Lucas had snatched the Akelian flag and made it safely over to Mokian land.

The Mokians let out cheers and cries of “hurrah!” Max was happy. He knew he had helped too, even without any of the superpowers he would have had if he had been on Planet Mari-Toe. Nope. His super-eagle-eye-power was all his own.

“Hey, Max. You did great at guarding the flag.”

“Thanks, AJ.”

Max and AJ grinned and clapped each other on the back and went to shake the hands of the Akelians who had gathered around as well.



“Good game, Akelians and Mokians,” Mr. Cook was saying into a megaphone. “I’m glad you had fun. And now I’m sorry to deliver bad news. It seems our camp food storage had a nest of fire ants hidden in one of the corners. If you remember, these are not gentle ants, but can give a nasty sting. We’ve been working on getting an exterminator out here, but right now our options have come to relocating farther into the forest or ending summer camp today.”

Max groaned. He was just beginning to have fun, and he wasn’t ready for it to end!

“We’ll be putting it to a vote,” said Mr. Cook. “It’s going to be a two-hour ride to the next campsite, and then we’d need to set up our tents again. It’s going to be extra work for everyone if we relocate, but it does mean that we can have three more days of fun. So, raise your hand if you’d like to relocate, and keep your hand down if you’re ready to go home.”

Most everyone raised their hand. AJ raised his hand, Max raised his hand too.

“All right then,” said Mr. Cook, “on to the next campsite! While you were playing, the camp staff packed most of your belongings and loaded them into the bus, so we’ll be going straight to the buses from here.”

“I thought you might want to go home,” said AJ to Max as they walked to the waiting buses at the campsite.

“Really? Why?”

“Because then you’d get to play *Escape from Planet Mari-Toe*,” said AJ, “and sometimes you stare off into space and play the game inside your head.”

Max blushed. “No. I can play that at home anytime.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” said AJ.

“Me too,” said Max and meant it.

“Maybe on our bus ride you can tell me about how to play *Escape from Planet Mari-Toe*.”

“I think you should tell me everything I missed from all that stuff on camping I didn’t read,” said Max.

Max left all thoughts of *Escape from Planet Mari-Toe* behind as he and AJ laughed and climbed aboard the bus that would take them to more summer camp adventure. *Planet Mari-Toe can wait*, thought Max.

The End

