

## CHAPTER 1

# *A Hole in the Water*

Let's race. Girls against boys."

**L** Brianna and Ivy stood beside each other, hands on hips, facing Levi and Xavier. It was the day after Thanksgiving, but the weather was strangely warm. The pond sparkled in the sunshine. The kids had spent the afternoon paddling around in the brand-new tandem kayaks that Evan and Xavier's parents had bought as an early Christmas present for the kids.

"You're kidding, right?" asked Levi, trying not to laugh. "You think you two can beat us?" Levi and Xavier looked at each other. Xavier was taller, but Levi had twice as many muscles as both girls put together.

"A sloth could beat you two," said Ivy, flipping her wavy, red hair.

"That's probably not true, technically," said Manuel, who sat at the edge of the dock with Evan, tossing fishing lines into the water. Manuel preferred water activities that didn't require actually getting into the water. "A sloth can only travel at a speed of about .15 miles per hour, while a kayak could reach a speed of—"

"What's a sloth?" asked Evan.

"Okay girls, let's do it," said Xavier, reaching for a paddle. "Last one to the other side of the pond has to buy the winning team a triple-decker sundae at the Snack Shack."

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“Each,” said Levi.

“Deal,” said Brianna. “Prepare to lose your allowance on ice cream.”

“We get the yellow one,” Ivy added. The two girls jumped onto the dock where the kayaks were tied up and took turns getting in.

“What about us?” said Evan, ditching his fishing pole. “I want to race too!” Evan used to be afraid of going in the pond, which was so big it might as well be a lake. It was quite deep and might (he thought) have been inhabited by a sea monster at one time or another. But since his travels to Ahoratos, which included *riding* a sea monster, those fears had evaporated.

“All that’s left is the rowboat,” said Levi. He and Xavier pulled the green kayak next to the dock so they could get into it. “It might leak a little.”

“I’ll row. You bail.” Evan grabbed Manuel’s arm and dragged him over to the old rowboat on the shore of the pond.

“That doesn’t look seaworthy,” said Manuel doubtfully.

“That’s okay; this isn’t the sea anyway.”

“Don’t forget your life jackets,” said Xavier with a grin. “You know Mom is watching from the kitchen window and will be out here in a second if you don’t put one on.”

“Yeah, I know. She has eyes in the back of her head.” Evan grabbed two life jackets from the edge of the dock and tossed one to Manuel, who held it with a puzzled expression, as if he wasn’t quite sure how to put it on.

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Xavier and Levi used their paddles to push away from the dock.

“I think they’ve got something up their sleeves,” Levi said, watching the two girls, who had their heads together as if forming a plan. “Probably going to capsize us or something.”

“Like they could get close enough to try,” said Xavier with a smirk. He turned to the girls. “You ready?”

“Just a sec.” Brianna rested her paddle on her legs and took a tube of lip gloss out of her pocket. She slathered glitter all over her lips.

“You need to fix your hair too?” asked Levi in a jeering voice.

“You’re so funny,” said Ivy. “On your mark, get set, GO!”

The two kayaks took off, the kids paddling furiously away from the dock. The girls called out a chant, “Catch us if you can!”

“Push us off!” Evan had already jumped into the rowboat and grabbed the oars. Manuel put on the life jacket and bent down to push against the stern of the boat. It didn’t budge. He drove his bony shoulders even harder against the boat, his feet sinking into the soft dirt.

“Come on!” Evan urged.

“It . . . won’t . . .” Manuel shoved again, and finally the boat edged away from the shore. Evan stuck the oar into the water and gave it an extra push. The boat started to float free.

“Jump in!” Evan shouted.

“Jump?” asked Manuel, wide-eyed.

“Hurry!”

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Manuel took a breath, grabbed hold of the stern, and threw one leg over, his glasses sliding down his nose. The little boat rocked like crazy.

“Whoa, man!” cried Evan. “You almost tipped us over!”

“Sorry!” Manuel pulled in his other foot and reached up to hold onto his glasses as Evan started rowing like mad to make up for lost time. They were already twenty feet behind the two kayaks.

Manuel looked with consternation at the water collecting around his ankles. He shivered a little—the water was cold.

“It’s leaking!”

“Grab the bucket! Start bailing!” Evan heaved with the oars. Manuel grasped the little sand bucket that rolled around on the bottom of the boat. It had a big crack in it. He sighed and began dumping small amounts of water overboard, bailing and tossing as fast as he could. He had to stop every once in a while to push his glasses up his nose.

“How far behind are we?” Evan was facing backward as he rowed, so he couldn’t see the kayaks ahead of them.

“Um . . . I don’t know. . . .” Manuel straightened to see around Evan, squinting into the sun. The pond was lined with large willows and had a bend in the middle, so he couldn’t see all the way to the other side. “I don’t see them.”

“Huh?” Evan twisted his head around to see. “They’re probably hiding behind those big trees. They

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think they're so funny. Just want us to think they won already."

Manuel shivered again. "Perhaps we should go back." The water sloshed up his leg. "I've got some homework. . . ."

"No way. We'll show them we won't quit." Evan rowed with renewed energy.

"Wait—what is *that*?" Manuel nearly stood up, rocking the whole boat.

"You're gonna tip us! What's the matter?"

"Look!" Manuel pointed to something over Evan's head. Evan stopped rowing and turned around. For a moment he didn't see anything. Then he gasped.

Just ahead of them a dark circle had appeared in the water. It was perfectly round, about five feet wide. It looked like a hole.

A hole in the water?

"What is that? A whirlpool?" asked Evan.

"Can't be," Manuel said. "There is not enough current here—"

The boat continued to drift toward the hole. Evan tried to row in the opposite direction, but the boat kept moving toward the hole, as if pulled by an irresistible force.

"Help!" Manuel yelled. "Help!" He started to gasp, his asthma acting up the more scared he got. "I need . . . my . . . inhaler . . ."

"Wait—look!" said Evan. "Do you see what I see?"

Manuel leaned over the edge of the boat to see what Evan was pointing at. There was something shimmering

on the surface of the hole. Fuzzy and indistinct at first, it soon took on a definite shape.



“It’s the Crest!” Evan cried. The Crest of Ahoratos. “That means this is—”

“The Water!” Manuel paused, realizing the sheer impossibility of what he had just said. “Wait a minute. *The Water*? But what is the Water doing here? In *this* water? On earth?”

“I think we need to go down there and find out.”

“What? Down *there*?”

“That must be where the others went. Come on! We don’t want to miss out!”

“No, no, no!” Manuel yelled as Evan pulled the oars into the boat, allowing it to steer itself toward the hole. “This is not a good idea!”

“Relax, Manuel! Count!” Evan didn’t feel scared at all, even though it was very peculiar that the Water should appear *on earth*. That had never happened before. The Water meant adventure. Something amazing was going to happen. He wasn’t about to miss it.

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“One . . . two . . . three . . .” Manuel felt his stomach jump up into his throat as the boat edged closer to the hole. He always counted when he was scared out of his wits. “We need to tell your mother . . .”

“Oh, she probably knows!” Evan gripped both sides of the boat as it tipped forward. He let out a cry of utter joy. “Woohoo!”

“We’re going to die!” Manuel shouted, the sound lost in the rush of the Water all around them, in their eyes and ears and mouths. “Four . . . five . . . six . . .” The boat went vertical and dropped into the hole.



“Like . . . Space . . . Mountain . . .” Evan choked out. He could see nothing but dark. He couldn’t even feel any water—it was like being in a protective tube in the middle of a waterfall. Like the tube rides he’d been on at Splash Zone, although those rides didn’t generally go straight down. He realized then that he wasn’t even in

the boat anymore. The boat had disappeared. He was falling feet first, his arms stretched above his head.

“Not . . . having . . . fun!” Manuel’s voice gurgled somewhere nearby.

“I am!” Evan shouted, although the words seemed to go right back down his throat. “BEST . . . RIDE . . . EVER!”

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The next thing Evan knew, he was in the Cave. Bluish, glowing stalactites dripped from the high ceiling, and rows of stalagmites encircled the floor like tiny mountain ranges. Sparks—little white puffs of light that floated everywhere in the Cave—danced around his head. He reached out to try and grab one, as he always did, but it evaded his grasp.

Manuel arrived a moment later, his eyes squeezed shut, two fingers holding his nose closed. He was no longer wearing his glasses. He didn’t need them in Ahoratos.

Evan nudged him. “It’s okay, Manuel. We’re here. We made it.”

“’Bout time you showed up.”

Evan whirled to see Xavier and the other kids already there. They were all in their warrior clothes, as he was: dark gray pants and shirts. They also wore their armor, the white triangular breastplate, the wide, plain belt, the tall boots, and the helmet, which looked sort of like a bike helmet except the surface was faceted rather than smooth.



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Evan resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at Xavier. He was nearly ten, too old for stuff like that, even if his older brother still got on his case from time to time.

“We thought you ditched us,” Evan said.

“Hey, we were as surprised as you were.”

“Still, a little warning would have been nice,” said Manuel, letting his tense shoulders relax a little.

“Greetings, Warriors.” A diminutive figure in a purple robe appeared from nowhere, his face hidden by a draping hood. Ruwach. Their guide in Ahoratos.

“Welcome back.” His voice was huge compared to his body, so big it filled the kids’ minds as well as the Cave. They had never actually seen Ruwach’s face, although they’d had glimpses from time to time of something that might have been a nose or eyes. Ruwach was still very much a mystery to them, and he seemed to like it that way. But he was also their friend; his very presence had become a strange sort of comfort to them.

“Ruwach!” said Ivy, running over to hug the small figure. Brianna did the same. “We’re so glad to see you!” The boys looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“I am glad to see you as well,” said Ruwach with a slight chuckle. “I have something special to show you today—”

“I have a question,” Manuel said, raising his hand as if he were in school. “Why was the Water on earth? I mean, normally when the Crest brings us to Ahoratos, we have to find the Water ourselves, but this time it found *us*, on earth, which seems out of the ordinary.”

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“Today is an out-of-the-ordinary day,” Ruwach said. “You will understand in a little while. We must go now.”

The kids glanced at each other. Ruwach seemed to be in an unusual hurry, which meant they were about to do something exciting and probably dangerous. Which might be fun but then again, might not.

“Where are we going?” Evan asked.

“Someplace you have not yet been. You will see. Follow me.”