

## Otherworld Tales Vol. 2: A Sequel

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### Chapter 1 - The Search

No doubt about it. Huff was missing.

I imagined the worst snowboard accident. Huff hit a tree and was knocked out or he wiped out somewhere in the forest, cold, hurt and freaked.

We had been having fun. My friend Streak was already racing downhill toward a snowboard jump, a kicker. He hit the wedge, did a 180 frontside grab, flew over the stepdown and skidded to a stop on the landing. "Hey!" He yelled back up the hill, "Beat that, dude!"

"Hold up, Streak!" I hollered. I cut around the jump, edged my board in and stopped next to him. "I'll beat you easy later. Right now, we gotta find Huff."

"Forget it, Irish. He's just slow. Besides, I'm hot. You see that trick?"

"Yeah, cool. But Huff was supposed to wait for us at the bottom. This is our fifth run. Nobody's that slow."

"He's probably still on Midnight Sun or waiting down there now. This is winter break, man. Fun time. Let's go." He took off.

"Okay," I yelled. But I couldn't see anyone wearing a green hat at the bottom of the hill.

We were at Mt. Shasta Ski Park and new powder had covered yesterday's tracks like a layer of salt. A blanket of gray sat overhead like a low mean ceiling, hiding the monster mountain. From Marmot lift, Streak and I had warmed up on Silvertip, the beginner terrain run, getting ready for Revolution. Huff had taken the long easy path down Midnight Sun.

I pulled up next to Streak at the bottom. "See," I said. "No Huff." There were only a dozen people in the Marmot lift line. The holiday crowd hadn't arrived yet.

I said, "Kathy's with her instructor at the end of the lift line. I'm gonna ask her if she's seen him." Mom and Dad had signed Kathy up for two days of private ski lessons. At eight years old she was darned good on skis, already a lot better than Huff on a snowboard.

I skidded into line behind her followed by Streak. "Kathy. Have you seen Huff? He was coming down Midnight Sun." In the cold air, her freckles stood out against her pale skin and her ponytail draped over her white ski suit collar. With red hair and freckles, we couldn't hide being from an Irish family.

"No," she said, "I haven't see him."

"Yup," Streak said, punching me in the shoulder. "He's just really slow."

"He's been gone since ten and it's almost lunchtime," I said. "He'd never miss lunch."

Kathy's instructor leaned closer. "Och, laddie. You should be telling the ski patrol." She wore a Ski Instructor parka with a nametag, fitted ski pants and a beaked hat with pads over her ears.

Surprised by her accent, I said, "You're Irish."

"Aye. 'Tis true."

We stepped aside to let some skiers ahead of us. "My grandparents live in Ireland, so my friends nicknamed me Irish. My real name's Pete Kehoe." I pointed back. "This is my friend, Streak."

"And you can be calling me Dawn." She was as tall as Streak, with dark hair and a round face with faint freckles. But it was a strange way to introduce herself, like Dawn wasn't really her name.

“We can't tell the ski patrol,” Streak said, leaning around me. “Huff”d be totally embarrassed. He’d freak if they sent the rescue sled out to get him. C'mon, Irish. We'll find him.” Streak, the tallest kid in our eighth grade class, had his big ears tucked in the green beret his dad had sent him from Iraq. He claimed it made him look tough, but I thought it made his head look like a green bottle cap.

Streak and I moved up next in line as Kathy and her instructor got ready for their chair. I stomped my board a couple of times to keep warm. It was a cold morning to be standing still. I said to Dawn, “We're gonna look for Huff on the way up the mountain. Then, if we don't find him on the way down, we'll tell the ski patrol. I promise.”

She gave me her serious instructor look. "All right, but I'll be checking on you." She and Kathy lifted off in their chair.

Streak shook his head. "Huff ain't gonna like it."

"You got a better idea?" A chair came around behind us.

"No."

Kathy was watching us from the chair ahead and waved as we lifted off. We had just started, when something hooked the front of my legs.

"Hey!" I yelled, holding on to the side of the chair. “Something's got me!”

"Me, too!" Streak had grabbed the pole and was thrashing his legs, trying to jerk them free, screaming, "Leeggggoo!"

I tried to stay on, but the moving chair was gonna rip my legs off. The chair tipped forward and we both let go at the same time, pitching forward off the seat, falling ten feet to the hard packed snow below. Streak kicked as we fell and his board hit me in the side of the head.

"Ow!"

We landed in a tangle, Streak on top, our legs and boards twisted together.

Kathy screamed and the lift operator slammed the control lever to a stop.

Streak pushed himself up. "You're bleeding, Irish."

I wiped my cheek and my hand came away bloody. "Damn!"

"Irish!" Kathy yelled, "Are you hurt?"

I waved. "I'm okay."

The lift operator crunched up through the packed snow and stood over us. "Stay put guys, until we check you out. What happened?"

Streak bounced up. "I dunno, but I'm fine." He leaned over and brushed snow off his Levis.

The operator put a hand on his shoulder. "Wait here."

Streak jerked back and glared at him.

Uh-oh, I thought. This guy's big.

The operator showed both hands in front of him to make peace. "Take it easy, friend."

"Chill out, Streak," I said.

Streak stared at the operator for a moment, then said, "Something grabbed my legs and wouldn't let go."

"Yeah," I said as I rolled over on one knee with my board under me so I could stand up. "It grabbed me, too."

A kid in the chair behind yelled, "I saw a guy with some ropes, but I thought he worked here."

The lift operator helped me up. "You're lucky you didn't break an arm or a leg. That cut on your head is bleeding. Wait a minute." He ran back to his cab and returned with a small box. "Here's a couple of clean tissues to stop the bleeding."

"Thanks."

"You kids wait behind the shed," he said. "The Ski Patrol has to talk to you."

Streak scrunched up his face. "What? We have to wait?"

"Yeah," the operator said as he picked up his phone. "It'll just take a minute."

It took forever. By the time the Ski Patrol guy finished his incident report, the lift line was three times as long. I tapped on the lift operator's shed window. "Can we get the next chair? We gotta find our friend."

"Okay." The lift operator said.

Streak and I clambered into the next empty chair and rode up scanning the forest on both sides, searching for any sign of Huff. I said, "Streak. Did you see a guy with ropes? He had to be on your side behind the operator's shed."

"I kinda saw somebody, but I was too busy trying to get loose."

"Weird."

"Yeah. But I'm watching now. If I see a dude doing anything weird, he's history."

Why didn't the lift operator see the guy? I didn't like this. The day was turning into a bummer. Then, two thirds of the way to the top, the lift stopped. We were stuck swinging in the wind, fifty feet in the air. Streak grumbled, "Beginners up ahead of us. They always fall down getting off the lift for the first time."

A light snow began to fall, collecting on our goggles. Streak was sitting on his hands. I pounded my gloved hands together to warm them up and yelled into the wind, "Let's go!"

Streak and Huff were my best friends. We called ourselves the Cool Dirt Bikers, CDB for short. The three of us hung out together in Lake County every summer for as long as I can remember. That's why Mom and Dad decided to invite them on this Mt. Shasta trip. I had learned to snowboard here, but this was their first time here and now Huff was missing.

Streak nudged me with his elbow. "Look over there." He pointed to a mound of snow piled up behind some trees. "It's Huff's barf green hat."

"I think you're right, Streak." The chair jerked and we started up again. "About time. I'm freezing."

At the top of the lift, we found Kathy waiting for us. We skidded to a stop and Kathy started talking fast. "I saw what happened. A big guy with a black cap flipped a rope or something under the chair. After you fell, he ran off. But before he left, he glanced up at me and he had red eyes."

Streak laughed. "Probably hungover."

"No," Kathy said. "It's . . . it's . . . I've seen red eyes before, but I can't remember where."

"Maybe a vampire?" Streak chuckled.

"Cut it out, Streak. She's right. Red eyes is like something I know, but I can't remember either . . . wait a minute. The snake. Last summer. Remember?"

Streak's forehead wrinkled. "What snake?"

"The big rattler," I said. "In the field. It went for you."

"Oh, yeah." His eyes opened wide as he remembered. "That's right. And you zapped it with a stick."

We stopped and stared at each other. It was a little piece of memory, the snake, the stick, but there was more. I shook my head. "That's all I can remember, but the snake had red eyes."

Streak nodded. "Yeah. It did."

How can a snake have red eyes? Why can't I remember more?

Kathy said, "I don't remember a snake."

"You weren't there, Kathy. But you must have seen red eyes somewhere."

She nodded her 'yes,' but then, shrugged. She couldn't remember either.

I was getting a bad feeling about this. We moved further to one side as more people got off the lift. "Kathy. We think we saw Huff's hat. We're gonna look for it."

"Can I go with you?"

"Where's Dawn."

"She's over talking to the lift operator."

"You better stay with her. Mom and Dad signed you up."

Kathy punched at the snow with her poles. "Boys get to do everything."

We started down the run slowly, cutting back and forth, stopping on the forest side every ten or twenty feet, looking for the mound of snow with Huff's hat. Streak took the lead. I followed, double checking areas in the trees.

About a third of the way down Midnight Sun, Streak yelled back up the hill, "Here it is." He was standing at the edge of the forest, waving the green hat.

I slid to a stop next to him. "Check his mom's label inside."

"Yup. Here it is. Harry Field."

"This new snow is thrashed around the mound," I said. "He must have wiped out here."

"Look." Streak pointed toward the deep forest. "His boot tracks go off into the trees. Maybe he's carrying his snowboard."

Tall pines on either side formed a dark corridor. I frowned. "Why would Huff go that way? He was supposed to meet us for lunch."

Streak said, "Maybe he hit his head. I saw this movie about a dude that . . ."

"Forget it," I said and pushed over to look at the tracks. New snow was beginning to cover them up. "Hey, Streak! There's another set of tracks. Someone went with him."

Streak scratched his head. "Who'd be walking with him here?"

"I dunno. The other tracks are flat, like street shoes, and they're huge. It must be a giant. This is totally weird."

I heard skis behind me and turned as Kathy snowplowed to a stop. "Did you find him?"

"What are you doing here?" I said, " You're supposed to stay with Dawn. Where is she?"

"She's coming. I skied ahead."

"You're in trouble, now."

"No, I'm not, 'cause you're gonna take care of me."

"Geez. Little sisters."

"I'm not little. I'm eight."

"You're little and you have to go back. It's snowing. This could be dangerous and Dawn will be looking for you."

"I'm gonna follow the tracks," she said as she dug in her poles and pushed off.

"Wait, Kathy, "I yelled after her. "Get back here! C'mon, Streak."

Streak rolled his eyes. "Girls. No sense."

Kathy used her poles to push herself along following the tracks. Streak and I scooted along behind her, pumping our boards. It was easy going down the gradual slope. Only a hundred feet into the thick forest, Kathy stopped. "They're gone. Both tracks end here."

“They can’t just disappear.” Streak said, peering around for someplace they could have jumped to.

“Yeah, but they do,” I said. A strange tingle ran up my back like something really weird was going on.

We were in a circular clearing in the middle of a forest, with trees all around us. Except for the sound of wind brushing the treetops against each other, it was dead quiet. The light snow continued to fall and big globs of snow occasionally fell off branches. I shook my head in wonder. What was going on?

"I don't get it," Kathy said. "What do we do now, Irish?"

"I dunno."

She stomped the snow with her skis a couple of times, then asked, “Does Huff have a cell phone?”

I hit myself on the side of the head. “Duh! Of course. His cell. Thanks, Kath.” I dug my cell out and punched in Huff’s number. It rang until it switched to voicemail. “Huff. Call me back if you get this.” I stuck the phone back in my pocket. “No answer. He probably doesn’t have it on.”

Streak, still trying to figure out the missing footprints in the snow, circled the trees, looking for low branches. “Maybe they climbed up. Some of these pines have low branches.”

“Maybe they turned into chimpanzees,” I said, “swinging from branch to branch back to the lodge.”

Streak punched me in the shoulder. I put one hand on his chest and pushed. His board slipped out from under him and he landed on his butt in the snow. “Dork!” I said. “Maybe you should keep your hands to yourself.”

Kathy cried out, "Stop it, both of you, or I'm . . . I'm gonna tell."

Streak smirked, "Who are you gonna tell in the middle of the forest?"

"Leave her alone, Streak."

Dawn skied up behind Kathy. "Aye. She could tell me for one. You're all out of bounds. This is clearly posted as being off limits. I could have you barred from the ski runs."

Streak leveraged himself up on his feet. "Sorry, ma'am. We need to . . ."

". . . find our friend," I finished for him. "We didn't mean anything by it. Right, Streak."

"Ahhh, yeah. Right. We gotta find Huff."

I frowned at Dawn. "How'd you find us here? And how'd you know what Kathy just said to us?" We weren't visible from the run and she was too far away to hear Kathy. Also, her Irish accent reminded me of someone, but I couldn't remember who.

"Never you mind that," she said. "Now . . ."

Kathy faced Dawn, both hands on her hips, just like Mom. "We know about the rules, but our friend is lost and we have to find him."

Streak stood up and said, "That's what I was trying to say, before Irish butted in. We followed Huff's tracks here, but they disappeared."

"And someone's with him wearing giant shoes," I added.

Dawn stared at me without blinking, her forehead creased, her mouth a firm line. She took a deep breath and said quietly, "I didn't expect this so soon."