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It's wonderful to have you here. You have unlocked a special digital copy of my children's book *Costumes*.

Costumes explores the courage it takes to face new challenges, especially when being yourself feels hard. It invites readers to step into magical worlds where anything is possible and to discover that sometimes the greatest adventure is learning to accept who you are.

Whether you are reading on your own, sharing with your class, or enjoying story time together, I hope *Costumes* sparks imagination and encourages self-confidence and inner strength.

A beautiful hardcover edition of this epic journey is now available to own. It's a wonderful way to bring this book to your home, add it to a classroom library, or give it as a thoughtful gift.

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Thank you for supporting stories that invite curiosity and wonder. I hope you enjoy every page.

Happy reading,

A.J. Craven



COSTUMES



WRITTEN BY A.J. CRAVEN
ILLUSTRATED BY TRISTAN TAIT

Sebastian was scared.

Tomorrow was close and he was extremely worried.

The move had been hard enough! But a new school as well?
It was all too much...

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Sebastian didn't enjoy meeting new people.
He always felt like others saw him as the
uninteresting one.

A boring kid, not worth their attention.

But at the same time, he felt like
he was always being judged.
As if everything he did was being
made fun of behind his back.

Sebastian always found it difficult to make
friends at his old schools. He just could never
seem to find a way to fit in with anyone else.
And tomorrow, he had to go through it all over
again. Yet another new school!

He just wanted to disappear!
To be someone else!
Anyone else...



As Sebastian reached the end of the path, he was abruptly pulled from
his thoughts. Before him stood an extremely unusual store. The wooden
shack looked like a relic from another time and place. It just didn't look
like it belonged there.

He knew the feeling. He felt it every day. But this only intrigued
him to step closer, if only to read the sign above the door.

"The Costume Collective," he whispered to himself.

"What is this place?" he thought as he nervously approached the door.
"And what is with the creepy shadows lurking in the windows?"



At that moment, a flash of light from a passing car lit up the store's windows, causing Sebastian to get the biggest shock of his life!

The silhouettes all lit up before him, displaying an array of scary figures, posed as if ready to attack. Monsters from parts unknown, gathered here for what could only be a feast. And Sebastian was now close enough to become their main course...

He winced and ducked his head, waiting for them all to pounce.
This was surely the end!

But the attack never came. He slowly raised his head to find the creatures still frozen in their poses. And then he understood what was going on...

"They're... just... costumes..." he huffed, trying to catch his breath.

That's when it clicked. Like a thousand light bulbs had suddenly lit up inside his head. He had a brilliant idea.

Sebastian realised that with the help of a costume from the store, he **could** disappear. He **could** be someone else. **Anyone** else!



Sebastian eagerly stepped into the peculiar store. What he saw surprised him beyond belief. The shop was gigantic! Way bigger than it appeared from the outside. Impossibly bigger...

As he glanced around at every costume imaginable, he saw them all as a huge opportunity. So many different ways to disguise himself. So many different ways to become someone else.

Then, something stirred! Sebastian's focus shifted to a sudden movement on the other side of the room. That's when he noticed the old man staring directly into his eyes, flashing a friendly smile. Had he not seen him move, he could have sworn the leathery face was just another costume.

"Greetings and welcome to The Costume Collective!" said the man with excitement.

"Please, feel free to try on any costume you wish. We always make sure our customers find exactly what they're searching for."

Sebastian felt anxious but decided to trust the elderly man. He needed a costume. And quick!

But before he could reach the shelves, a flickering glow caught Sebastian's attention. It leaked from behind a dusty bedsheet that covered something large. Something unusual. Something not of this world...



Sebastian just had to know what was underneath the sheet.
The old man noticed his gaze and grinned.

"I see that you've taken note of our store's most beloved item,"
beamed the man as he grasped the bedsheet in one hand.
"I present to you... the Mystic Mirror!" He tore down the
sheet, sending dust flying across the store.

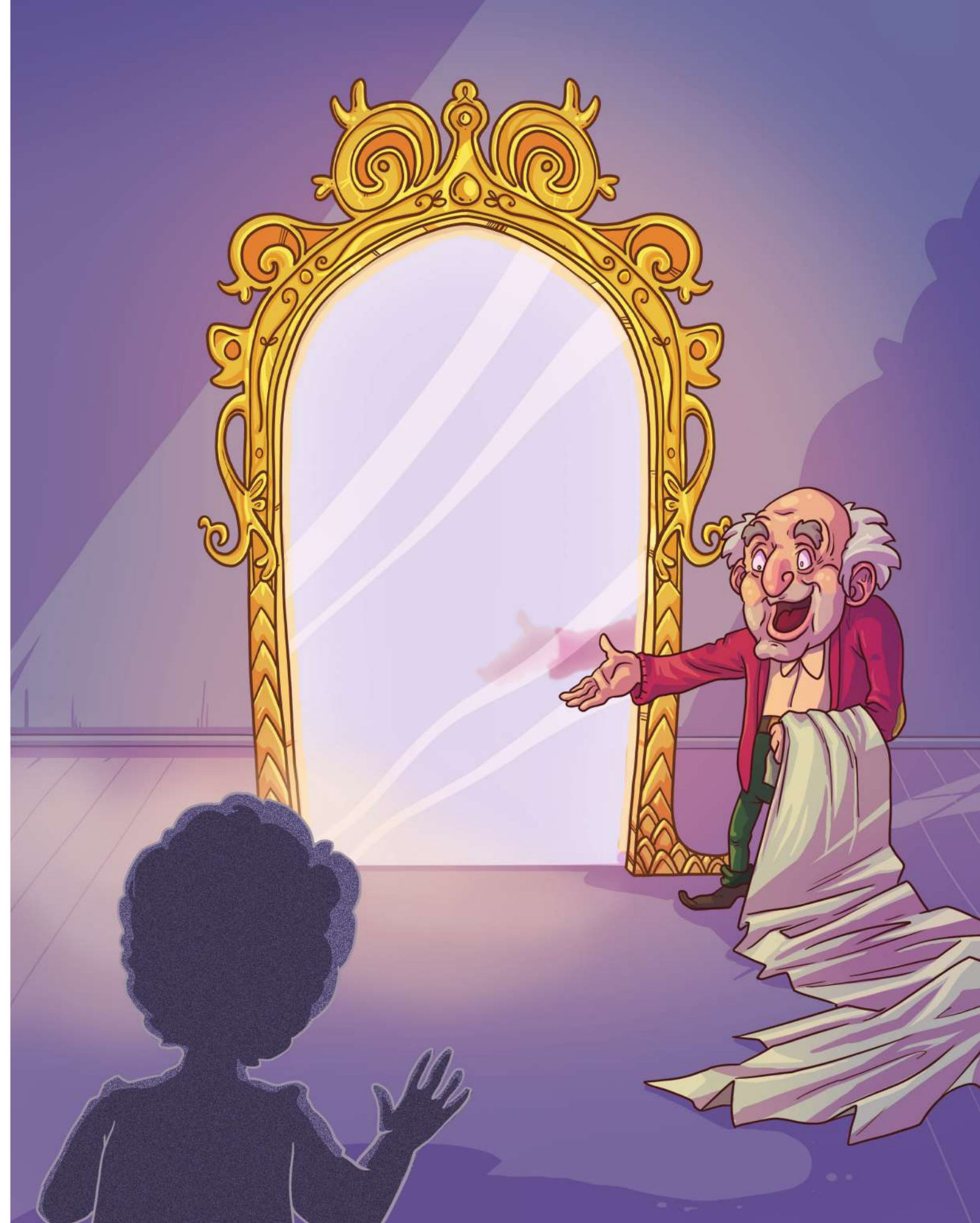
Sebastian was in awe! The mirror was the most extraordinary
thing he had ever seen. He couldn't wait to try on his first
costume and see the different person staring back at him.

As if reading his mind, the old man added, "Be forewarned,
as this is no ordinary mirror! Your choices within the store
will be reflected to you in ways beyond your imagination..."

"No ordinary mirror? Ways beyond my imagination?"
Sebastian couldn't make sense of what the man meant, but he
couldn't delay any longer. It was time for change.

He hastily searched the shelves of the store, gathering all the
items needed for his costume. As he returned to the mirror, he
couldn't bring himself to look at his reflection. He didn't want to
stare back at the boring kid he knew they all saw. The kid he so
badly wanted to hide.

So Sebastian swiftly put on all the parts of the costume, looked
up into the mirror and..



Sebastian found himself surrounded by a world filled with

Ancient Warriors!

He couldn't believe his eyes! He had no idea how it happened, but he was sure it had something to do with the Mystic Mirror. Still, he didn't care. All he could think about was that this could be it. He could dress as any of the warriors here and truly feel like he was someone else. Someone who might be able to fit in with the others. Someone they might finally accept...



But as Sebastian looked closer upon the world before him, he came to realise...

He didn't want to appear as someone who did whatever they pleased, without any care for those around them.



And he didn't want to be seen as someone who blindly follows others without question.



And he especially didn't want to feel more invisible than he already did!

So Sebastian removed the costume. It was not for him. But he was not ready to give up yet. Not that easily!

"The Mystic Mirror did show me my choice in a way I never would have imagined," he said, surprised. "This mirror will help me find the perfect costume, I just know it!"

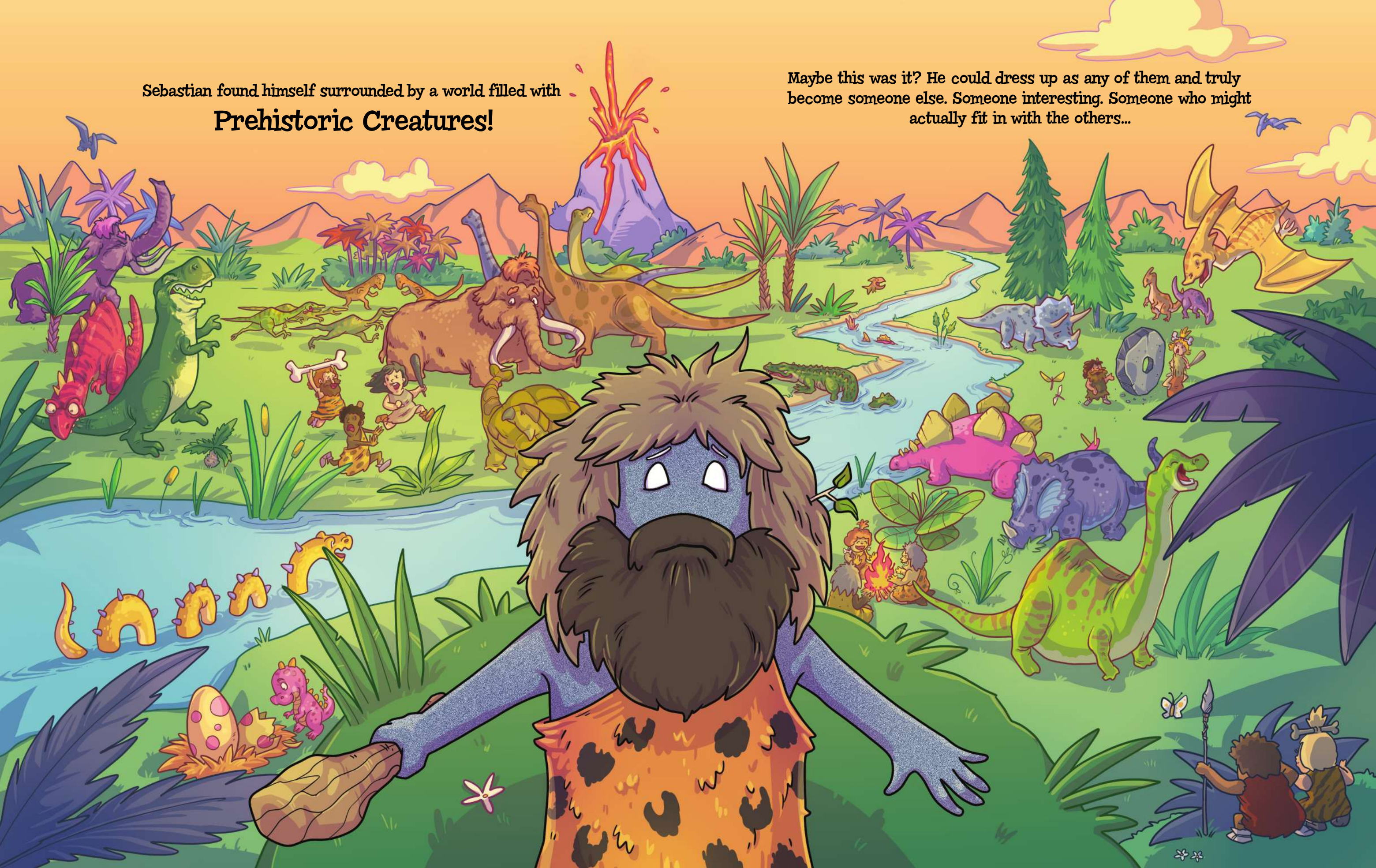
He returned to the shelves in search of something different. He had to become someone else and soon!



So Sebastian assembled all the pieces to make another costume. "This one will be perfect," he thought as he quickly put it on. It was only when fully disguised that he felt comfortable enough to look up into the mirror and..

Sebastian found himself surrounded by a world filled with
Prehistoric Creatures!

Maybe this was it? He could dress up as any of them and truly
become someone else. Someone interesting. Someone who might
actually fit in with the others...



But as Sebastian gazed out at the world before him, he came to realise...

He didn't want to be seen as someone who couldn't handle the constant dangers all around them.



And he didn't want to appear as someone who was always clearly on guard.



And he especially didn't want to be seen as someone who used aggression to solve their problems!

So Sebastian quickly removed the costume. It was not for him.

He still wasn't ready to give up though. Not yet!

Just the thought of having to meet all those new people tomorrow had him back at the shelves. Searching for someone new to become.

Sebastian decided on something a little spookier this time around. So after gathering everything needed, he quickly threw it on, looked up into the mirror and...



Sebastian found himself surrounded by a world filled with

Monstrous Looking Beings!

Could this be it? So many options before him. So many characters to disguise himself as. So many ways to possibly fit in and be accepted by the others....

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Monstrous Looking Beings!

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But as Sebastian stared upon the world before him, he came to realise...

He didn't want to be seen as someone who feared the outside world, too afraid to step into the day.



And he didn't want to appear as someone even more lonely and misunderstood than he already felt.

And he especially didn't want to be seen as someone without the guts to stand up for themselves!

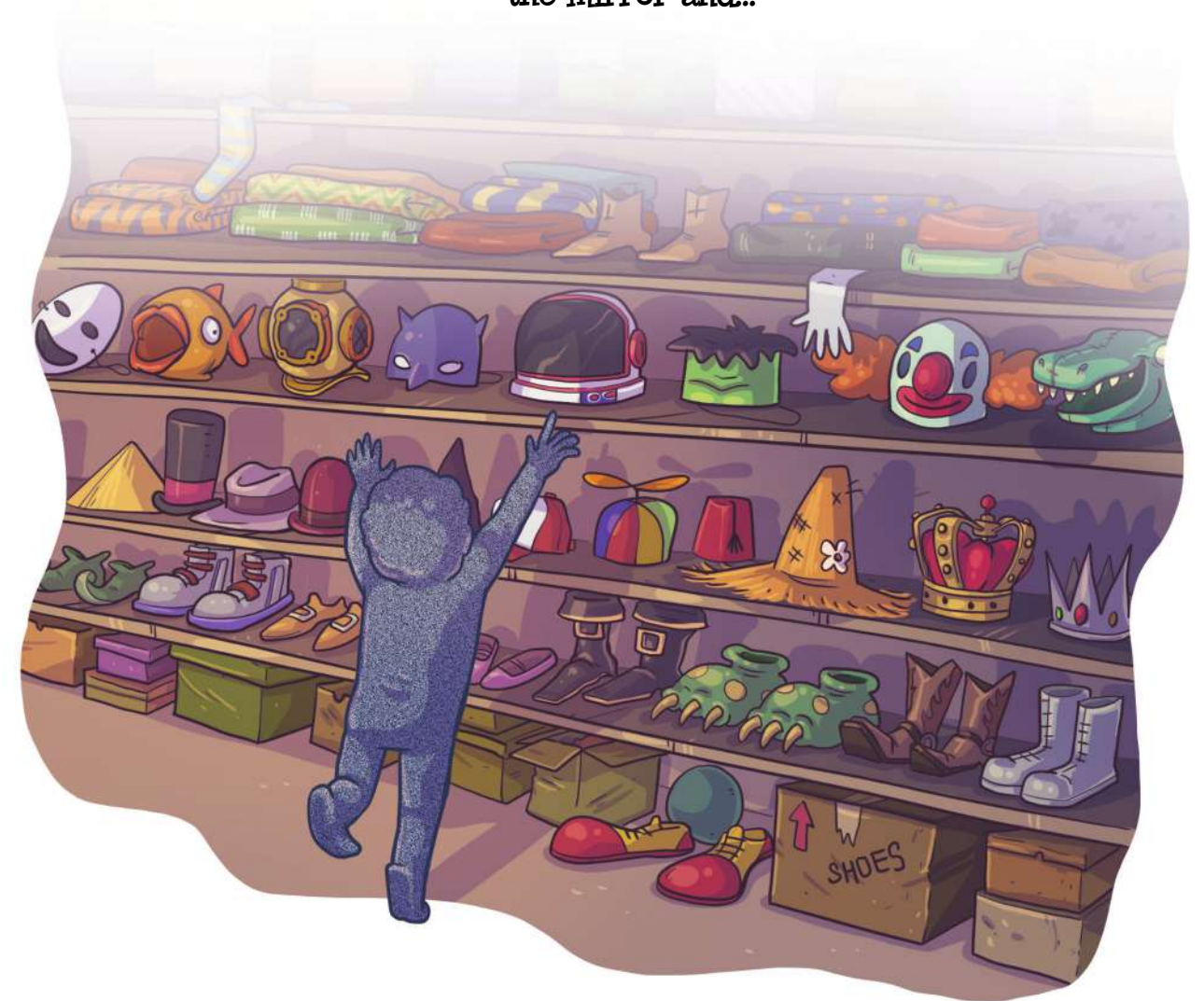


So Sebastian tore off the costume. It was definitely not for him!

He was sweating. His throat was dry. All these failed attempts to hide himself were getting overwhelming.

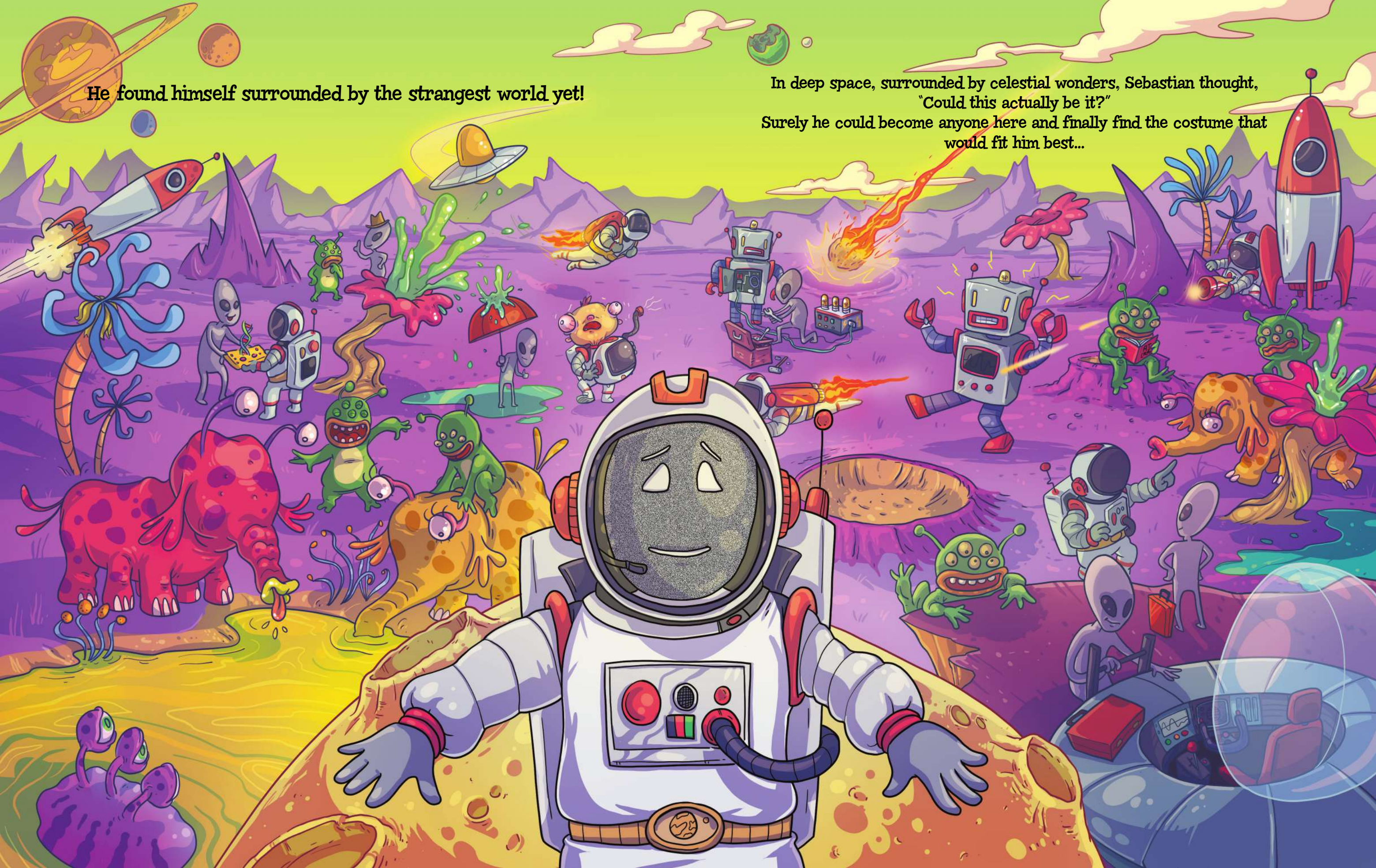
"No!" Sebastian declared. He couldn't let these negative feelings win. Not now. Not when he was this close. He just had to find a costume that worked.

This time, he chose something far more cosmic from the shelves. He hoped it was the one. It had to be! He put it on, looked up into the mirror and...



He found himself surrounded by the strangest world yet!

In deep space, surrounded by celestial wonders, Sebastian thought,
"Could this actually be it?"
Surely he could become anyone here and finally find the costume that
would fit him best...

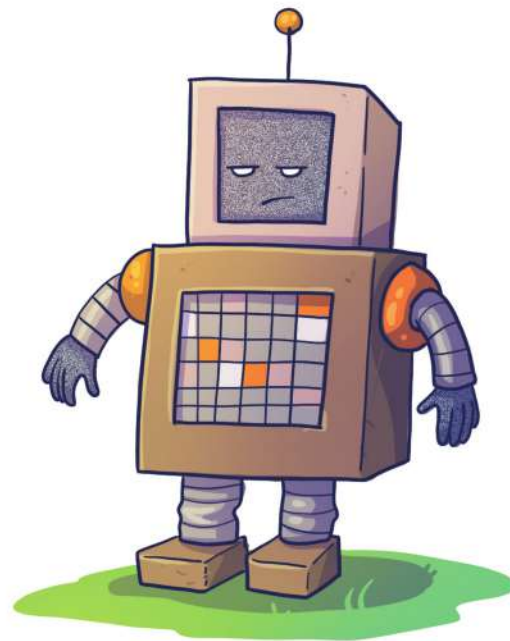


But as Sebastian took a closer look upon the immense world before him,
he finally came to realise...

He didn't want to be seen as someone
drifting alone, cut off from everyone
else.



And while tempting at times, he didn't
want to appear as someone who never
let their feelings show.



And he already felt so alien from
everyone else. How could dressing
up like this make it any better?



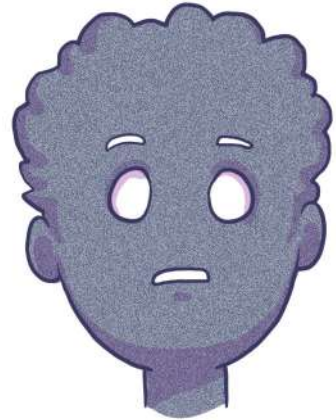
Defeated, Sebastian removed the costume. It was not for him. None
of them were.

Was there no way for him to feel like he belonged? No way to feel
interesting? No way to fit in with the others?

At that moment, Sebastian heard a strange humming sound coming
from the mirror. He glanced up to see an eerie glow shining from
behind the glass. Fearfully, he took a timid step closer...



Sebastian looked up into the Mystic Mirror's glass, unable to resist. And it was at that moment, he stared back into his own reflection. He couldn't remember the last time he'd dared to look. He could never bring himself to do it. But this time, something was different. The mirror was encouraging him.



So he stared.



And stared.



And stared.

Before he knew it, Sebastian was standing in a new world. It was his world! And right in the centre, he saw himself.

He saw Sebastian.

He was seeing himself for who he truly was. He was unique. He was an individual. And when he thought about how he would be seen by the others tomorrow, a new thought crossed his mind.

"I don't care.
I am Sebastian.
I've got this."



He no longer wanted to find a disguise. For the first time he could remember, he didn't want to be someone else.

He **WAS** someone else!

As Sebastian left The Costume Collective, he
was no longer scared.

Tomorrow was even closer than before, yet
he felt no more worry.

He had no idea what the day ahead had in
store, but for the first time ever, it didn't
feel like it was all too much.

He was Sebastian. And he needed no
costume!



Hi there! Thanks so much for joining me on the Costumes adventure. I hope the story inspired you to imagine new possibilities and gave you a little extra courage to be yourself. I had a blast bringing Sebastian's journey to life and sharing it with readers like you.

I'm A.J. Craven, author and educator. I was raised on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia, where curiosity and wonder shaped the way I saw the world. That led me to become a primary school teacher, and for the past ten years, I've taught in schools across Australia, Asia, and Europe, meeting incredible students whose originality and enthusiasm inspired me to start writing for children.

Teaching, storytelling, and writing fiction all come together in the books I create. I love crafting stories that ignite imagination, build confidence, and encourage kids to leap boldly into new worlds. My time in the classroom shows me how kids question, learn, and interact, and that enthusiasm fuels every tale I share.

When I'm not teaching or writing, you might find me smashing out wild rhythms on the drums, soaking up the energy of live music, or chasing adventures around the world. I've lived and worked in five countries and traveled to more than 50. Every place has given me fresh perspectives and vibrant experiences that feed directly into everything I write.

To get your own copies of my books or see what's coming next, visit:

ajcraven.com

