Hello, everyone. My name’s Kenneth Oppel, I’m the author of Bloom. In the story, strange, black grass starts growing everywhere across the planet. It grows incredibly quickly, no one knows where it comes from, it crowds out crops and it produces pollen that everyone on the planet is allergic to, except my three heroes: Anaya, Petra, and Seth, who live on Salt Spring Island, off the coast of Vancouver. I’m going to read you a scene where new plants start to appear on the planet, and Anaya is crossing the field, the school field one day with her friend Tereza and strange pit-like plants start opening in the field and people are falling in. Tereza panic and starts to run.

Anaya caught up to Tereza and grabbed her arm with both hands, just as the earth collapsed. Tereza plunged feet first, dragging Anaya after her, headfirst.

In a cascade of soil, Anaya skidded down the slick purple funnel, and jolted to a stop, upside down. Her head and shoulders were wedged between the plant wall and Tereza’s ankles.

Through the narrow gap between their bodies, she got an upside-down view of Tereza shouting for help at the circle of cloud-streaked sky. They must’ve been over six feet under. From outside she heard some muffled shouting and a few high-pitched shrieks.

“Can you jump?” she hollered at Tereza.

Anaya winced as her friend’s knees banged against her ribs, and her shoes knocked her skull. But their bodies were too tightly jammed together for Tereza to make a proper jump.

“Help!” Tereza yelled again.

No one was coming. Anaya felt something cobwebby against her cheek. From the slick plant wall, long silver hairs lifted and brushed against her. In revulsion, she tried to jerk her face away. She couldn’t even use her hands: one was pinned uselessly near the top of her skull, the other at her hip. She blew hard at the little hairs. Tiny pores perforated the plant wall, and through these pores now came a pale mist.

“What’s that smell?” Tereza demanded.

It was sickly sweet — the same as the smell from the bag of soil in her driveway. The top of the plant quivered and started to close, its fleshy lips compressing.
“No!” Tereza wailed. “No, no, no!”

“Tereza!” Anaya shouted. “Just climb over me!”

The circle of sky shrunk. It was getting darker. The cloying smell intensified. Tereza yanked her feet free and planted one in Anaya’s armpit, the other on her backside.

“Go!” Anaya grunted.

“I feel so weak,” Tereza said, and her voice sounded dopey.

“Just jump!”

What was taking her so long? Instead of pushing off, Tereza sagged listlessly against the wall.

Anaya pulled down her knees and wrenches herself in so many directions she was amazed she didn’t tear every muscle in her body. But the funnel walls had a surprising amount of give, and she elbowed and kicked her way upright. Now she and Tereza were squished together face to face. Her friend’s eyes had a strange, unfocused look.

With a wet smacking sound, the top of the plant shut completely and they were plunged into darkness. “Your lighter,” Anaya said. “Grab your lighter!” “Can’t reach it.” Tereza’s words were slurred.

Anaya’s hands dived into the tight pockets of Tereza’s jeans until she found the lighter. She pulled it out and dragged her thumb over the wheel. A flame blossomed in the darkness.

Tereza’s head lolled and knocked against Anaya’s shoulder.

“Tereza, wake up!”

“Yeah, I’m awake,” Tereza said, blinking.

In the flickering light, the walls trembled, then glistened. From all the tiny pores, moisture beaded and formed little rivulets.

Cutting through the sickly perfume was the acrid smell of burning hide and rubber. Anaya looked down and saw a puddle forming at their feet. Smoke curled from the bottoms of their shoes.

“Oh my God,” breathed Anaya. Acid. “Tereza, don’t touch the walls!”

Which was impossible, since there wasn’t room to move without brushing the walls. Already she heard hissing from the back of her own shirt. She tried to pull clear without pushing Tereza into the opposite wall.
She held the lighter as high as she could against the closed top of the sac. The hottest part of the flame was at the very tip—someone had told her that long ago. There was a wet crackling, and a smell like a candle burning the inside of a jack-o’-lantern, only not as nice.

The plant trembled, making both her and Tereza bounce against the walls. Fabric hissed as it touched, and she heard her friend cry out.

“My hand!” Tereza said, holding it in front of her face.

Anaya saw the blistered fingertips. She wondered how long their shoes would last. The foul smoke welling up from below thickened.

Come on, come on! She glared at the scorch marks fanning out across the top of the plant. Hot liquid dripped down onto Anaya’s outstretched hand. She sucked in her breath, waiting for the pain. But it didn’t come.

With a great spasm, the top of the plant opened. Anaya squinted in the sudden light, and looked anxiously at Tereza, who was staring numbly at her blistering hand.

“Tereza, I’m going to get out, then help you! Okay?”

Tereza said nothing. Anaya pocketed the lighter, bent deep at the knees, and jumped. She didn’t know where this new strength came from, but she went much higher than expected, head and shoulders clearing the rim. Her arms shot out, and she dug into the grass. Her legs still hung down inside the plant and she heard the acid hiss on her jeans, felt a wetness on her legs. But no pain at all.

The plant made a gulping contraction, trying to swallow her back down. She held tight and dragged her entire body out.

Instantly she scrambled around and stretched out both hands for Tereza.

“Grab hold!” Her friend still looked confused, and Anaya didn’t know whether it was the pain or the weird perfume.

“Tereza! Now!”

Her friend reached up and Anaya grabbed her hands and pulled. Her arms had never been strong, and Tereza was a deadweight, too dopey to help.

“My feet are burning,” Tereza said with eerie calm.

Anaya knelt so she could lean back and use her own weight. She pulled with everything she had, but she knew it wouldn’t be enough.
So, you just met the pit plants in my *Bloom* series, acid digesting plants that trap and eat their prey. Anaya completely unharmed by this acid. That’s *Bloom*. The second book in the series, *Hatch*, is coming out September 15th, I thought I’d just read you a very quick intro to *Hatch*. This is in fact the opening passage.

[Author reading]

It’s going to be ok.

They were rising, they were getting out. Beyond the metal walls of the elevator, Petra heard the rattle and clack of cables pulling them higher. *Up, up, up*, she chanted inside her head. Her heart beat against the cage of her ribs. She stared at the control panel, wishing they could go faster. Sweat prickled her back. The elevator was packed with anxious teenagers, jostling against each other, in their color-coded jumpsuits.

Petra did another quick head count. They were all here, no one left behind. Not even Seth. She found him in the crowd, still in his hospital gown. They’d rescued him just in time.

*Up, up, up.* Soon, the elevator would jolt to a stop. Soon, the doors would open. Soon, they’d be free.

Beside her, Anaya squeezed her hand, and Petra squeezed back. She was so grateful to have her oldest friend in the world with her. It didn’t matter that Anaya looked different now. It was still Anaya, and she, Petra, was still the same, despite everything. “I am still me,” she thought. The thought was like a rope she clung to, like the elevator cable lifting them out of here. If it frayed and snapped, all was lost.

It’s going to be ok.

From deep below, a rusty squeal. The elevator wobbled, and Petra touched her hand against the wall, like she was comforting it, giving it a little bit of encouragement: “You can do it, elevator.”

“Are we too heavy?” she whispered to Anaya. She didn’t know why she was whispering.

“‘It’s a freight elevator,’” her friend said, “‘we should be fine.’” Nothing they could do about it now, anyway, they were still rising and that was all that mattered.

*Up, up, up.* On the control panel, there were only two buttons. The top one was lit, a pale, flickering light beckoning them to the outside. The elevator shuddered, and stopped. She turned hopefully to Anaya, “are we there?”

With a frown, her friend shook her head. “It’s too soon.”

“Too soon?” Petra felt like they’d been in here forever. She stared at the doors, willing them to open. They didn’t.
“Something’s wrong,” Anaya said.

“We stuck or something?” Frantically, Petra stabbed at the top button and gasped as the elevator dropped a little. From below came the anguished sounds of metal twisting. It sounded like it was being chewed. She didn’t want to think about the kind of teeth that could eat metal. She didn’t want to think what would happen if those teeth chewed right through the elevator cable.

Another downward tug. The elevator suddenly seemed a lot smaller, the air thinner. Petra gulped back the panic blooming through her body. “We’ve got to get out of here,” she said looking at the ceiling. The elevator shuddered violently, and the light blinked out.

[Author speaking]

That’s the opening of *Hatch*, coming September 15th. I hope you enjoyed that, thank you very much for listening. Bye for now!