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The Beast From the East - Goosebumps 43

R. L. Stine

When I was a really little girl, my mom would tuck me into bed at night. She would whisper, "Good night, Ginger. Good night. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

I didn't know what bedbugs were. I pictured fat red bugs with big eyes and spidery legs, crawling under the sheet. Just thinking about them made me itchy all over.

After Mom kissed me on the forehead and left, Dad would step into my room and sing to me. Very softly. The same song every night. "The Teddy Bears' Picnic."

I don't know why he thought that song made a good lullaby. It was about going into the woods and finding hundreds and hundreds of bears.

The song gave me the shivers. What were the bears eating at their picnic? Children?

After Dad kissed me on the forehead and left the room, I'd be itching and shaking for hours. Then I'd have nightmares about bedbugs and bears.

Until a few years ago, I was afraid to go into the woods.

I'm twelve now, and I'm not scared any longer.

At least, I wasn't scared until our family camping trip this summer. That's when I discovered that there are a lot scarier creatures than bears in the woods!

But I guess I'd better begin at the beginning.

The first thing I remember about our camping trip is Dad yelling at my brothers. I have two ten-year-old brothers — Pat and Nat. You guessed it. They're twins.

Lucky me — huh?

Pat and Nat aren't just twins. They're identical twins. They look so much alike, they confuse each other!

They are both short and skinny. They both have round faces and big brown eyes. They both wear their brown hair parted in the middle and straight down the sides. They both wear baggy, faded jeans and black-and-red skater T-shirts with slogans no one can understand.

There is only one way to tell Pat from Nat or Nat from Pat. You have to ask them who they are!

I remember that our camping trip began on a beautiful, sunny day. The air smelled piney and fresh. Twigs and dead leaves crackled under our shoes as we

followed a twisting path through the woods.

Dad led the way. He carried the tent over his shoulder, and he had a bulging backpack on his back. Mom followed him. She was also loaded down with stuff we needed.

The path led through a grassy clearing. The sun felt hot on my face. My backpack began to feel heavy. I wondered how much deeper into the woods Mom and Dad wanted to go.

Pat and Nat followed behind us. Dad kept turning around to yell at them. We all had to yell at Pat and Nat. Otherwise, they never seemed to hear us. They only heard each other.

Why was Dad yelling?

Well, for one thing, Nat kept disappearing. Nat likes to climb trees. If he sees a good tree, he climbs it. I think he's part chimpanzee.

I tell him that as often as I can. Then he scratches his chest and makes chimp noises. He thinks he's really funny.

So there we were, hiking through the woods. And every time we turned around, Nat would be up a tree somewhere. It was slowing us down. So Dad had to yell at him.

Then Dad had to yell at Pat because of his Game Boy. "I told you not to bring that thing!" Dad shouted. Dad is big and broad, kind of like a bear. And he has a booming voice.

It doesn't do him much good. Pat and Nat never listen to him.

Pat walked along, eyes on his Game Boy, his fingers hammering the controls.

"Why are we hiking in the woods?" Dad asked him. "You could be home in your room doing that. Put it away, Pat, and check out the scenery."

"I can't, Dad," Pat protested. "I can't quit now. I'm on Level Six! I've never made it to Level Six before!"

"There goes a chipmunk," Mom chimed in, pointing. Mom is the wildlife guide. She points out everything that moves.

Pat didn't raise his eyes from his Game Boy.

"Where's Nat?" Dad demanded, his eyes searching the clearing.

"Up here, Dad," Nat called. I shielded my eyes with one hand and saw him on a high branch of a tall oak tree.

"Get down from there!" Dad shouted. "That branch won't hold you!"

"Hey — I made it to Level Seven!" Pat declared, fingering frantically.

"Look — two bunny rabbits!" Mom cried. "See them in the tall grass?"

"Let's keep walking," I groaned. "It's too hot here." I wanted to get out of the clearing and back under the cool shade of the trees.

"Ginger is the only sensible one," Dad said, shaking his head.

"Ginger is a freak!" Nat called, sliding down from the oak tree.

We made our way through the woods. I don't know how long we walked. It was so beautiful! So peaceful. Beams of sunlight poked through the high branches, making the ground sparkle.

I found myself humming that song about the bears in the woods. I don't know what made it pop into my head. Dad hadn't sung it to me in years and years.

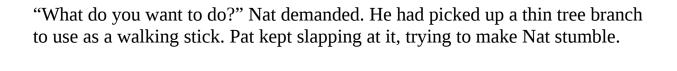
We stopped for lunch by a clear, trickling stream. "This would make a nice camping spot," Mom suggested. "We can set up the tent on the grass here by the shore."

Mom and Dad started to unpack the equipment and set up the tent. I helped them. Pat and Nat threw stones into the stream. Then they got into a wrestling match and tried to shove each other into the water.

"Take them into the woods," Dad instructed me. "Try to lose them — okay?"

He was joking, of course.

He had no way of knowing that Pat, Nat, and I would soon be lost for real — with little hope of ever returning.



We had followed the stream for a while. I saw a million tiny, silver minnows swimming near the surface. Now we were making our own path through the tangle of trees, low shrubs, and rocks.

"Hide-and-seek!" Pat declared. He slapped Nat. "You're It!"

Nat slapped him back. "You're It."

"You're It!"

"You're It!"

"You're It!"

The slaps kept getting harder.

"I'll be It!" I cried. Anything to keep them from murdering each other. "Hurry.

Go hide. But don't go too far."

I leaned against a tree, shut my eyes, and started to count to one hundred. I could hear them scampering into the trees.

After thirty, I counted by tens. I didn't want to give them too big a head start. "Ready or not, here I come!" I called.

I found Pat after only a few minutes. He had crouched behind a large white mound of sand. He thought he was hidden. But I spotted his brown hair poking up over the top of the sand.

I tagged him easily.

Nat was harder to find. He had climbed a tree, of course. He was way up at the top, completely hidden by thick clumps of green leaves.

I never would have found him if he hadn't spit on me.

"Get down, creep!" I shouted angrily. I waved a fist up at him. "You're disgusting! Get down — right now!"

He giggled and peered down at me. "Did I hit you?"

I didn't answer. I waited for him to climb down to the ground. Then I rubbed a handful of dried leaves in his face until he was sputtering and choking.

Just a typical Wald family hide-and-seek game.

After that, we chased a squirrel through the woods. The poor thing kept glancing back at us as if he didn't believe we were chasing after him. He finally got tired of the race and scurried up a tall pine tree.

I glanced around. The trees in this part of the woods grew close together. Their leaves blocked most of the sunlight. The air felt cooler here. In their shade, it was nearly as dark as evening.

"Let's go back," I suggested. "Mom and Dad might be getting worried."

The boys didn't argue. "Which way?" Nat asked.

I glanced around, making a complete circle with my eyes. "Uh ... that way." I pointed. I was guessing. But I felt ninety-nine percent sure.

"Are you sure?" Pat asked. He eyed me suspiciously. I could see he was a little worried. Pat didn't like the outdoors as much as Nat and me.

"Sure I'm sure," I told him.

I led the way. They followed close behind. They had both picked up walking sticks. After we had walked a few minutes, they started fighting a duel with them.

I ignored them. I had my own worries. I wasn't sure we were walking in the right direction. In fact, I felt totally turned around.

"Hey — there's the stream!" I cried happily.

I immediately felt better. We weren't lost. I had picked the right direction.

Now all we had to do was follow the stream back to the clearing where we had set up camp.

I began to hum again. The boys tossed their sticks into the stream. We began to jog along the grassy shore.

"Whoa!" I cried out when my left boot started to sink. I nearly fell into a deep mud patch. I pulled my hiking boot up. Soaked in wet, brown mud up over the ankle.

Pat and Nat thought that was a riot. They laughed and slapped each other high fives.

I growled at them, but I didn't waste any words. They're both hopeless. So totally immature.
Now I couldn't wait to get back to camp and clean the thick mud off my boot. We jogged along the shore, then cut through the skinny, white-trunked trees and into the clearing.
"Mom! Dad!" I called, hurrying over the grass. "We're back!"
I stopped so short, both boys tumbled into me.
My eyes searched the clearing.
"Mom? Dad?"
They were gone.

"They left us!" Pat exclaimed. He ran frantically around the clearing. "Mom! Dad!"

"Earth to Pat," Nat called. He waved his hand in front of Pat's face. "We're in the wrong place, you wimp."

"Nat is right," I replied, glancing around. There were no footprints, no tent markers. We were in a different clearing.

"I thought you knew the way, Ginger," Pat complained. "Didn't they teach you anything at that nature camp?"

Nature camp! Last summer my parents forced me to spend two weeks at an "Explore the Great Outdoors" camp. I got poison ivy the first day. After that, I didn't listen to anything the counselors said.

Now I wished I had.

"We should have left markers on the trees," I said, "to find our way back."

"Now you think of it?" Nat groaned, rolling his eyes. He picked up a long, crooked stick and waved it in my face



As we walked along, the air became cooler. The path grew narrower.

The water turned dark and murky. Silvery-blue fish snapped at the air. The skinny branches of the tall trees reached down toward us.

A feeling of dread swept over me. Nat and Pat grew quiet. They actually stopped picking on each other.

"I don't remember any of these bushes near our campsite," Pat said nervously. He pointed to a short, squat plant. Its strange blue leaves looked like open umbrellas stacked one on top of the other. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

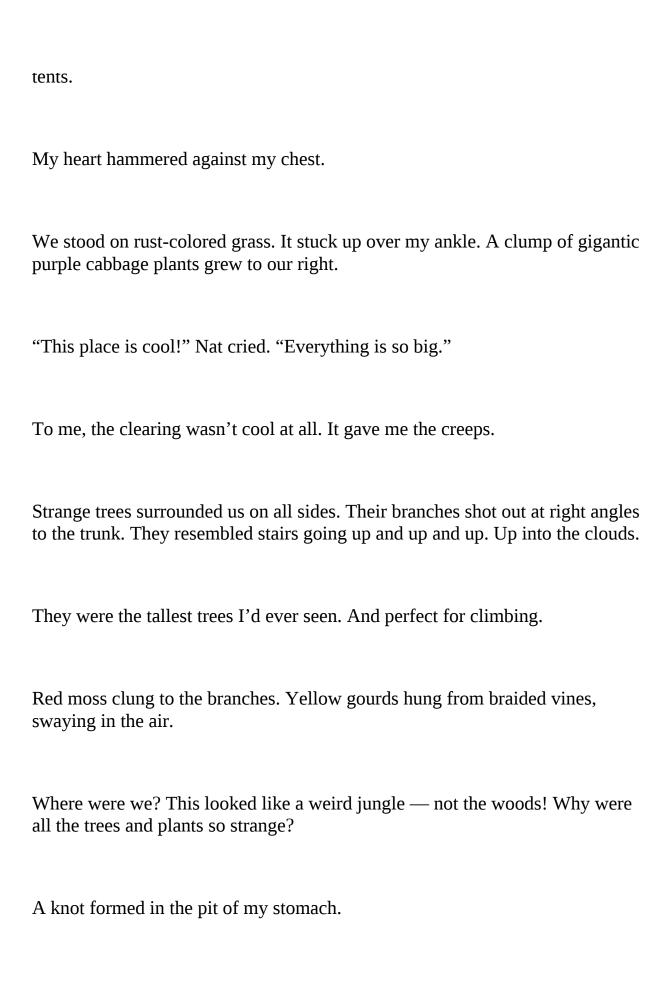
By now I was sure we weren't headed in the right direction. I didn't remember those strange bushes, either.

Then we heard a noise on the other side of the shrubs.

"Maybe that's Mom and Dad!" Pat exclaimed.

We pushed our way through the plants. And ran into another deserted clearing.

I glanced around. This grassy field was enormous. Large enough for a hundred



Where was our clearing? Where were Mom and Dad?

Nat jogged over to a tree. "I'm climbing up," he said.

"No, you don't," I protested. I rushed over and pulled his arm from the branch.

The red moss rubbed against my palm. My skin turned red where I touched it. Now I had a yellow-and-red design on my hand.

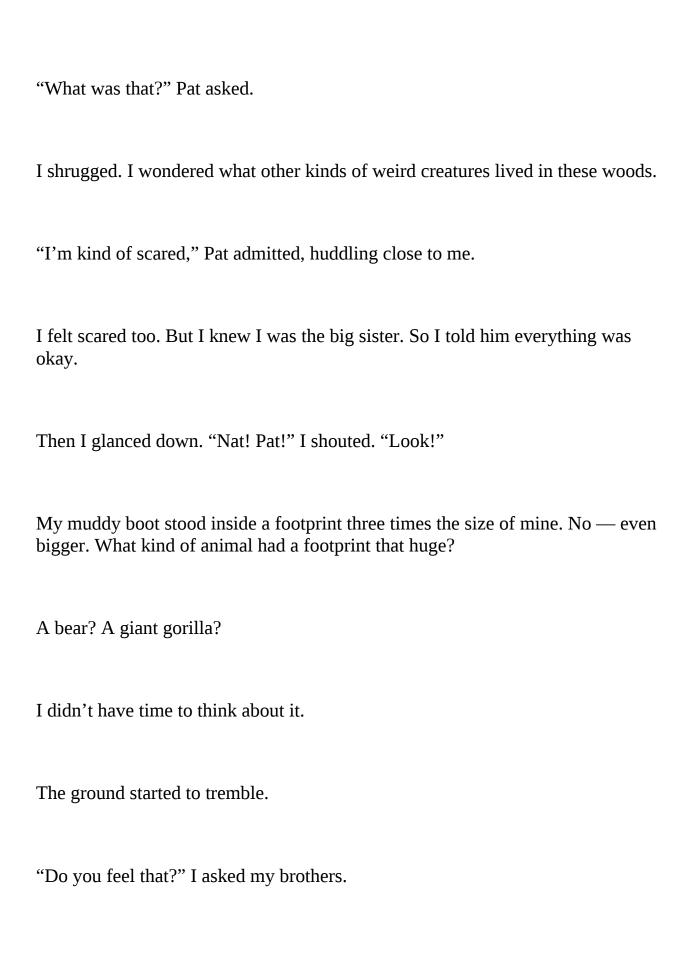
What's going on here? I wondered.

Before I could show my hand to my brothers, the tree started to shake.

"Whoa! Watch out!" I cried.

A small furry animal jumped out of the branches and landed at my feet. I had never seen anything like it before. It was the size of a chipmunk, brown all over except for a white patch around one eye.

It had a bushy tail and floppy ears like a bunny. And two big front teeth like a beaver. Its flat nose twitched. It stared at me with gray eyes, round with fear. I watched it scurry away.



"It's Dad!" Pat shouted. It definitely was not Dad. He's a big guy. But no way could he make the ground shake that way! I heard grumbles and growls from somewhere in the distance. And then a roar. Twigs and branches snapped loudly in the air. All three of us gasped as a tall beast stomped through the trees. It was huge. So tall that its head touched the middle branches. It had a narrow, pointy head over a long neck. Its eyes shone like bright green marbles. Shaggy blue fur covered every part of its body. Its long, furry tail thumped heavily on the ground. The weirdest creature I'd ever seen in my life! The beast entered the far side of the clearing. I sucked in my breath as it drew closer. Close enough for me to see its long snout. Its nostrils flared in and out as it sniffed the air.

My brothers hung back, hiding behind me. We huddled together. Trembling.

The beast opened its mouth. Two rows of sharp, yellow teeth rose up from purple gums. One long, jagged fang slid down over the creature's chin.
I crouched on my hands and knees. Pulled my brothers down with me.
The beast spun around in circles. It sniffed the air and wiggled its hairy, pointed ears. Had it smelled us? Was it searching for us?
I couldn't think. I couldn't move.
The beast turned its ugly head. It stared at me.
It saw me.

My eyes on the creature, I grabbed my brothers by their T-shirts. I dragged them behind some of the huge cabbage plants.

The beast stayed on the other side of the clearing, sniffing the air. It stomped back and forth, sniffing hard. The ground seemed to shake each time one of its furry paws hit the ground. I could feel Nat and Pat shiver with fear.

The beast turned away from us.

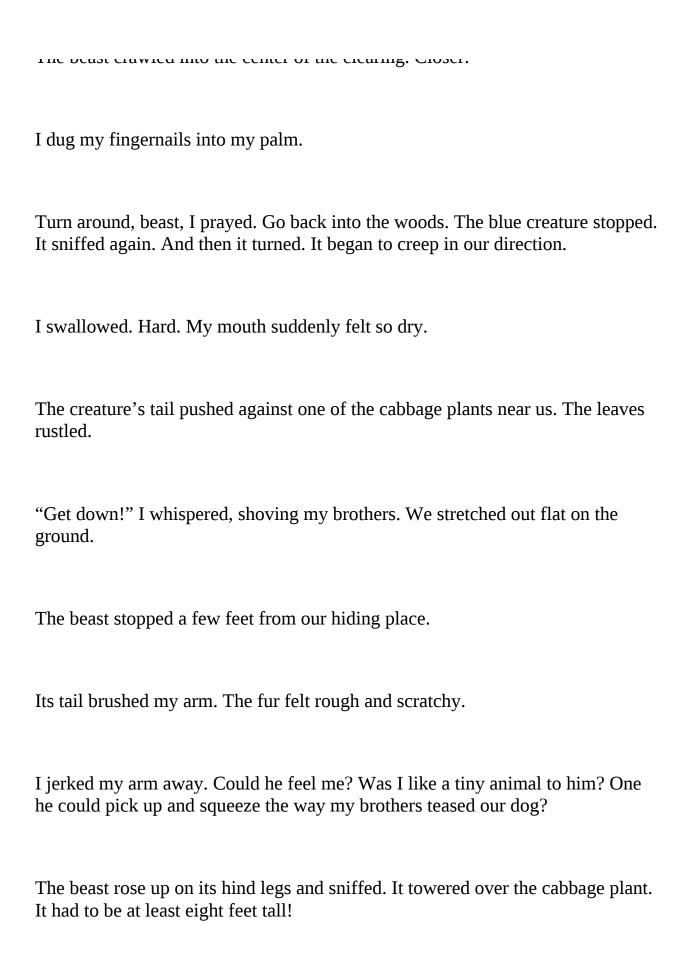
Whew! I thought. It hasn't seen us. I bit my bottom lip and held onto Pat and Nat.

"Argggh," the beast grunted. It dropped to all fours. It pressed its snout to the ground and crept along, making loud snuffling noises.

I didn't tell Pat or Nat what I was thinking. The beast hadn't seen us — but there was no way we could keep it from smelling us.

Its long tail swished back and forth. The tail banged against the trees. Gourds fell to the ground.

The heast crawled into the center of the clearing Closer





The beast's enormous blue head bobbed up between the trees. How had it come back so fast? And from the other direction?

We scrambled back to our hiding place behind the huge cabbage plant.

"We have to get away from here," I whispered. "If it keeps searching back and forth, it's bound to find us."

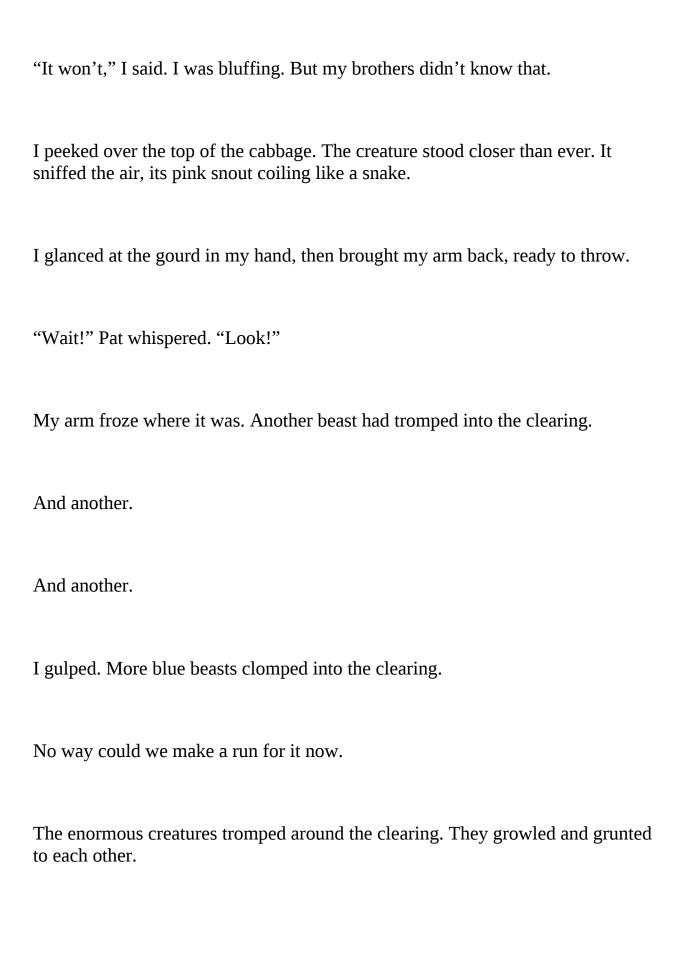
"How do we get away?" Nat demanded.

I picked up a gourd from the ground. "I'll throw this gourd. The beast will turn its head to see what the noise is. Then we'll run — in the other direction."

"But, what if it sees us? What if it chases us?" Nat asked. He didn't seem happy about my plan.

Nat and Pat exchanged nervous glances.

"Yeah. What if it runs faster than us?" Pat demanded.





The small beast suddenly scooped a gourd off the ground. It shoved the whole thing into its mouth and crunched down. Yellow juice squirted between its lips and soaked down its shaggy blue fur.

It eats fruit! I cheered silently. That was a good sign. Maybe they are vegetarians, I thought. Maybe they don't eat meat.

I knew that most wild animals ate only one type of food. Either meat, or else fruits and vegetables.

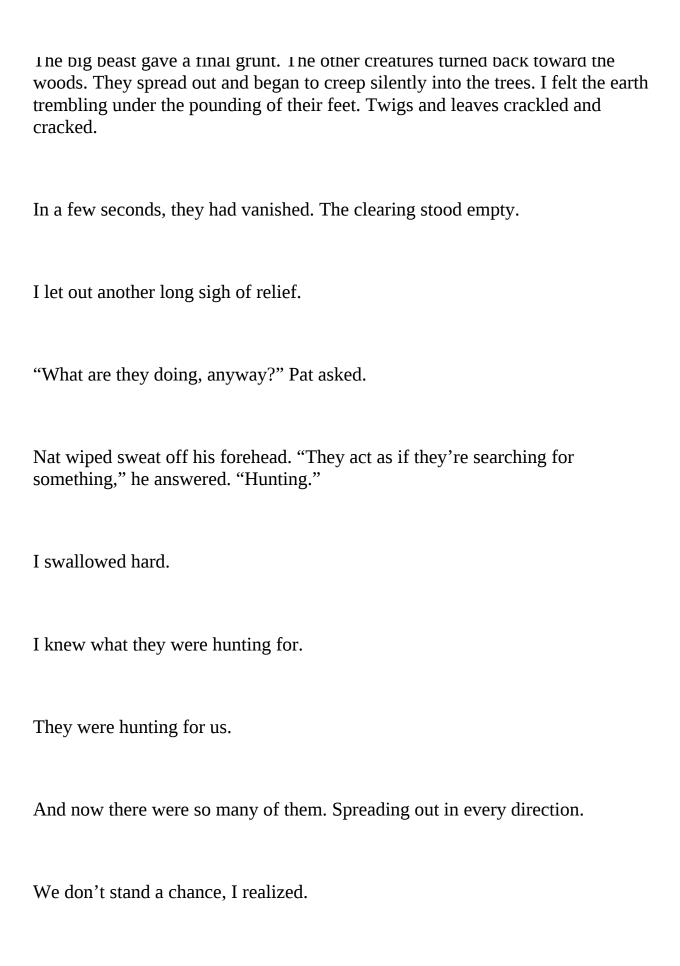
Except for bears, I suddenly remembered. Bears will eat both.

A large beast thudded over to the kid. It yanked the little creature to its feet and began jabbering angrily at it. It dragged the kid back toward the woods.

The beast with the hairless folds of skin stepped into the center of the clearing.

"Grrugh!" It snorted at the others. It waved a furry paw in a circle. It waved and grunted and jabbered.

The other creatures nodded and grunted to one another. They seemed to understand each other. They seemed to be grunting some kind of language.



They're going to catch us.

And then what?

I stood up slowly. I turned in a full circle, checking everywhere for a sign of the hairy creatures.

Their low grumbles and growls faded into the distance. The ground stopped shaking.

A gust of cool wind blew through the clearing. It made the gourds in the trees knock against each other. An eerie melody whistled through the trees.

I shuddered.

"Let's get out of here. Now!" Nat cried.

"Wait!" I told him. I grabbed his arm and held him back. "Those beasts are too near. They'll hear us or see us."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going to stick around. I'm going to run as hard as I can. I'm outta here!"

"I'm with you." Pat leaped to his feet. "But which way do we go?" he asked.

"We can't go anywhere now," I argued. "We're lost. We don't know which way to go. So we have to stay right here. Mom and Dad will come find us. I know they will."

"And what if they don't? What if they're in trouble, too?" Nat asked.

"Dad knows how to survive in the woods," I said firmly. "And we don't."

At least I didn't. If only I had listened at that outdoors camp.

"I do, too!" Pat whined. "I can take care of myself. Right Nat? Let's get going!"

Who was he kidding? Pat didn't even like the woods.

But he's stubborn. When he gets an idea, no one can change his mind. And Nat always agrees with him. Twins!

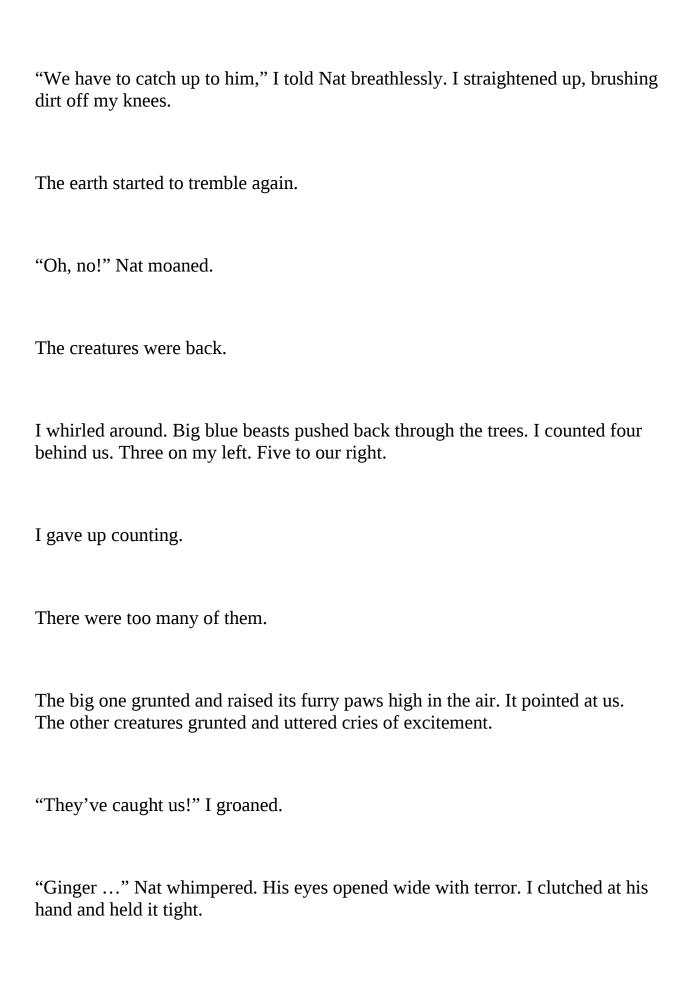
"Ginger — are you coming or not?" Pat demanded.

"You're crazy," I told him. "We have to stay here. That's the rule, remember?"

Mom and Dad always told us if was over not lost stay where was are

midin and Dad armays told as, if we ever get lost, stay where we are. "But there are only two of Mom and Dad — and there's three of us," Pat argued. "So we should go find them." "But they're not the ones who are lost!" I cried. "I think we should go," Pat repeated. "We have to get away from those ugly creatures!" "Okay," I told them. "We'll go. At least we'll be together." I still thought they were wrong. But I couldn't let them go off without me. What if something horrible happened to them? Besides, I didn't want to stay in these strange woods alone. As I turned to follow them, I glimpsed something move in the tall grass. "It's ... it's ... them!" Nat stammered. "They're back!" I stared at the grass in horror.





The beasts drew closer. And formed a circle around us.

Nowhere to run now.

"We're trapped," I whispered.

The beasts began to growl.

Over the drone of their low growls, I heard the eerie melody whistling through the gourds again.

Nat huddled close to me. "They've got us," he whispered. "Do you think — do you think they got Pat?"

I couldn't answer. I couldn't talk.

I felt weak and helpless. Sweat ran down my face into my eyes. I wanted to wipe the sweat away, but I couldn't lift my hand to do it.

I was too scared to move.

Then the beast with the flabby chin stepped forward. It stopped a few inches away from me.

I slowly raised my eyes. I stared at its furry belly. Then its broad chest. I saw shiny, black insects crawling in its fur.

I raised my eyes to its face. Its green eyes glared down at me. It opened its mouth. I stared helplessly at its long fang, chipped on the end.

You don't need a tooth like that for eating fruit! I thought.
The beast stretched to its full height. It raised a furry paw high above us. Ready to strike.
Nat huddled closer to me. I could practically feel his heart beating through his T-shirt. Or maybe it was my own heart that was pounding.
The creature growled and swung.
I squeezed my eyes shut.
I felt a slap on my shoulder — so hard it knocked me backwards.
"You're It!" the creature bellowed.

Huh? My mouth dropped open in astonishment.

"You're It," the beast repeated.

I gaped at Nat. His eyes bulged in surprise.

"It ... it talked!" Nat stammered to me. "In our language."

The creature scowled at Nat. "I talk in many languages," he growled. "We have a universal language adaptor."

"Oh," Nat said weakly. He and I exchanged stunned glances.

The creature growled again and took a step closer to me. "Did you hear me?" he growled. "You're It!"

His marble eyes glared into mine. He tapped a paw impatiently on the ground.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

The creature grunted. "You're the Beast from the East," he said. "What are you talking about? I'm not a beast. I'm a girl!" I declared. "Ginger Wald." "I am Fleg," the beast replied, pounding himself on the chest. He waved a paw at the creature beside him, a beast with one eye missing. "This is Spork," Fleg announced. Fleg pounded the other beast on the back. Spork grunted at Nat and me. I stared at his dark, empty eye socket. And I spotted a deep black scar on the side of Spork's nose. An eye missing and a scar. The big creature had been in a pretty nasty fight. I hoped it wasn't a fight with a human. Because if Spork was the winner, I would hate to see the loser! Nat gaped at Spork. "Uh, this is my brother Nat," I said quickly. Spork growled in reply. "Have you seen our mom and dad?" I asked Fleg. "See, we're all here camping,

"There are others?" Fleg glanced sharply around the clearing. "Where?"

"That's the problem," Nat answered. "We can't find them."

Fleg grunted. "If you can't find them, they can't play."

"Right. That's the rule," Spork agreed. He scratched at the insects that climbed around in his fur.

"Now start moving," Fleg demanded. "It's getting late. And you're It."

I stared at Nat. This was too weird. What did he mean — they can't play? And why did he keep saying I was It? Did they want to play tag or something?

The circle of beasts began stomping their paws, shaking the forest ground. "Play ... play ..." they chanted.

"Play what?" I demanded. "Is this really some kind of game?"

Spork's eye bulged and a big smile spread under his ugly, pink snout. "The best game," he said. "But you are too slow to win."

Spork rubbed his paws together. He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth. "You should run." He grunted.

"Yes, run," Fleg ordered. "Before I count to trel."

"Hold on," I protested. "What if we don't want to play?"

"Yeah — why should we?" Nat demanded.

"You have to play," Fleg replied. "Read that sign over there."

He pointed to a cardboard sign tacked to one of the gourd trees. The sign read: GAME IN SEASON.

Fleg stared down at me. His eyes narrowed menacingly. His wet nose flared.

He grinned. Not a friendly grin.

"Game in season?" Nat read the sign in a trembling voice.

"Vou have to tell us how to play "I declared "I mean we can't play a dame

Tou have to ten us now to pray, Tuectared. Timean, we can t pray a game without knowing what it is."

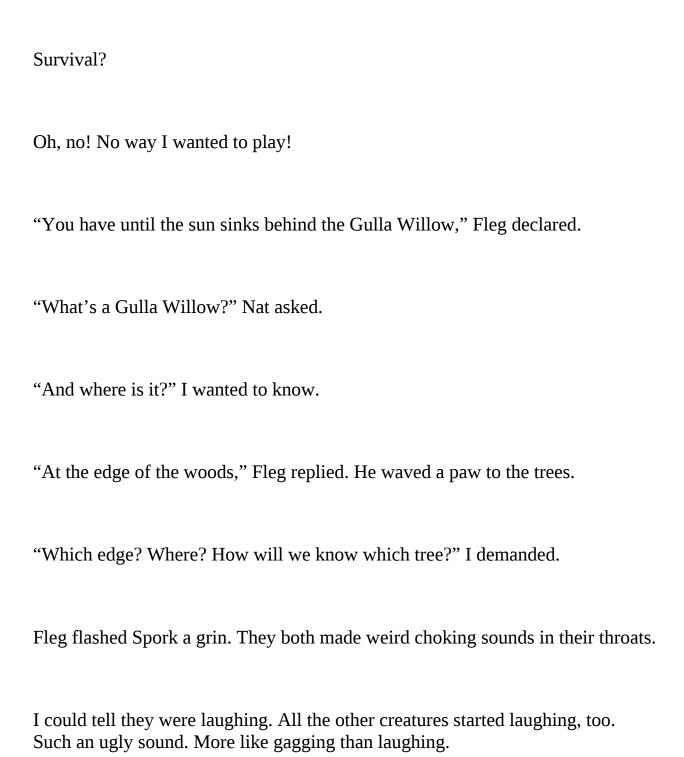
Spork growled deep in his throat and moved closer to me. So close I could smell his fur. What a sour stench!

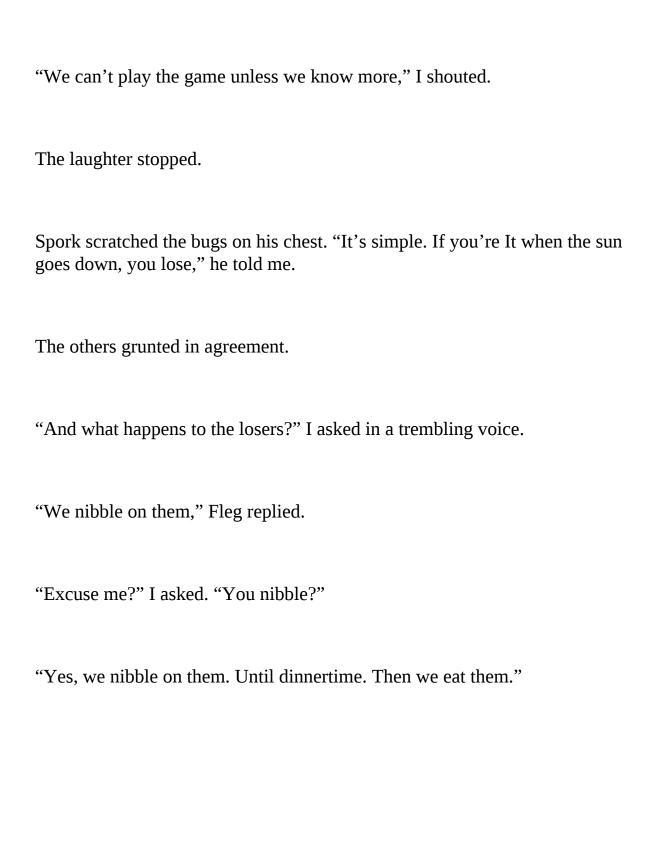
Fleg reached out a paw and held Spork back.

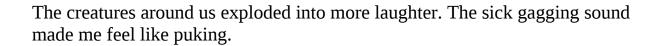
"It's a good game," Fleg told us. "It's very exciting."

"Uh ... why is it so exciting?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed. "It's a game of survival!" he replied with a grin.







"It's not funny!" Nat shrieked.

Fleg narrowed his eyes at us. "It's our favorite game."

"Well, I don't like your game!" Nat cried.

"We're not going to play. We don't want to," I added.

Spork's eye lit up. "You mean you surrender? You give up?" He smacked his lips hungrily.

"NO!" I shouted. Nat and I jumped back. "We'll play. But by the rules. You have to tell us the rules. All of them."

A cloud rolled overhead. It cast a shadow over the clearing. I shivered.

Were they going to attack us because we didn't want to play?



East. North. South. West. I pictured a map. East was to my right. West to my
left. But which direction was east out here in the woods? Why hadn't I listened
at that outdoors camp?

"Proo — the brown squares are Free Lunch squares," Fleg continued.

"You mean they're for resting? They're safe?" I asked. I liked that rule. Maybe we could find a brown square and stay there until sunset.

Fleg snorted.

"No. Free Lunch. It means anyone can eat you!" He glared down at me. "Rule Zee," he announced. "You must be three feet tall to play."

I glanced at the beasts. They were at least ten feet tall! So much for Fleg's rules.

"Well, thanks for explaining," I said, shaking my head. "But we really can't play this game. We have to find our parents and — "

"You must play," Fleg growled. "You're It. You're the Beast from the East. Play — or surrender."

"The sun will be down soon," Spork added, licking his fang.

"You have until the sun goes down behind the Gulla Willow tree," Fleg said. "Then, the Beast from the East is the loser." Spork made a choking sound, his ugly laugh. "You will make a delicious loser. I'm thinking maybe a sweet-and-sour sauce. Or perhaps you'd go better with something a little more spicy." The creatures all gagged and choked. They thought Spork was a riot. Fleg turned to the woods. He stopped. "Oh," he added with an evil grin. "Good luck." "Good luck," Spork repeated. He poked a finger into his open eye socket and scratched inside it. Then he turned and lumbered after Fleg. The other creatures followed. The earth trembled under their heavy feet. In a few moments, the clearing stood empty again. I gaped at Nat. This wasn't a game! These evil monsters searched the woods for lost kids. And then they — "What are we going to do?" Nat cried. "Maybe they already ate Pat. Maybe they found him on a brown Free Lunch square."

"And Mom and Dad, too," I murmured. He let out a frightened gasp. "There has to be someplace safe!" I told him. "The way we use the porch at home when we play tag." Nat swallowed nervously. "What's safe here?" I shrugged. "I don't know," I admitted. "We can call time-out," Nat suggested. "You're always allowed a time-out in every game." "This is different. This is for our lives," I said softly. The leaves rustled in the trees above us. The wind made the gourds whistle.

I heard a low growl. Then a creature laughed. That ugly gagging sound. Twigs

crackled. Bushes swayed. I heard low grunts.

"Wa'd hatter start playing" Nat urged "They cound hungry"

vve a better start praying, rvat argea. They sound numbery.



"Whooa!" Nat jerked his hand away and leaped back. The animal scurried into the underbrush.

Nat swallowed hard. "Weird," he murmured. "What kind of forest is this? How come there aren't any normal animals?"

"Shhh!" I placed my finger over my lips and scowled. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything," Nat complained.

"Exactly," I answered.

The grunts and growls and choking laughter had vanished. The woods were quiet. Really quiet.

"Now's our chance!" I cried. "Let's run for it." I grabbed his hand.

"Wait!" Nat cried. "Which way?"

I squinted around the clearing. "Back to the stream," I declared. "We'll try to follow it back to Mom and Dad. Maybe we'll hear their voices along the water."

"Okay," Nat agreed.

We raced across the clearing. We plunged into the woods and pushed through the thick line of trees.

I peered ahead into the forest. "This way!" I shouted, pointing to my left.

"Why?" Nat asked.

"Because," I said impatiently. "I see light through the trees up ahead. That means the woods thin out. There were fewer trees near the stream, remember?"

I hurried on. Nat followed. We ran silently for a while. The trees did begin to thin out. Soon, scraggly bushes dotted the ground.

"There!" I stopped. Nat nearly crashed into me. "Up ahead."

"The stream!" Nat exclaimed. He slapped me a high five.

Excited now, we began to run. We reached the water at about the same time.

"Now what?" Nat asked

"Let's head left again," I suggested. "The sun was in our eyes when we started. So now we want it on our backs."

Yes! I thought. We were definitely headed back the way we came. All we had to do now was follow the stream back to the right clearing. Back to our parents.

"Stay low," I told Nat. "Try not to make any noise, just in case." In case the beasts were following us. "And keep an eye out for Pat," I added.

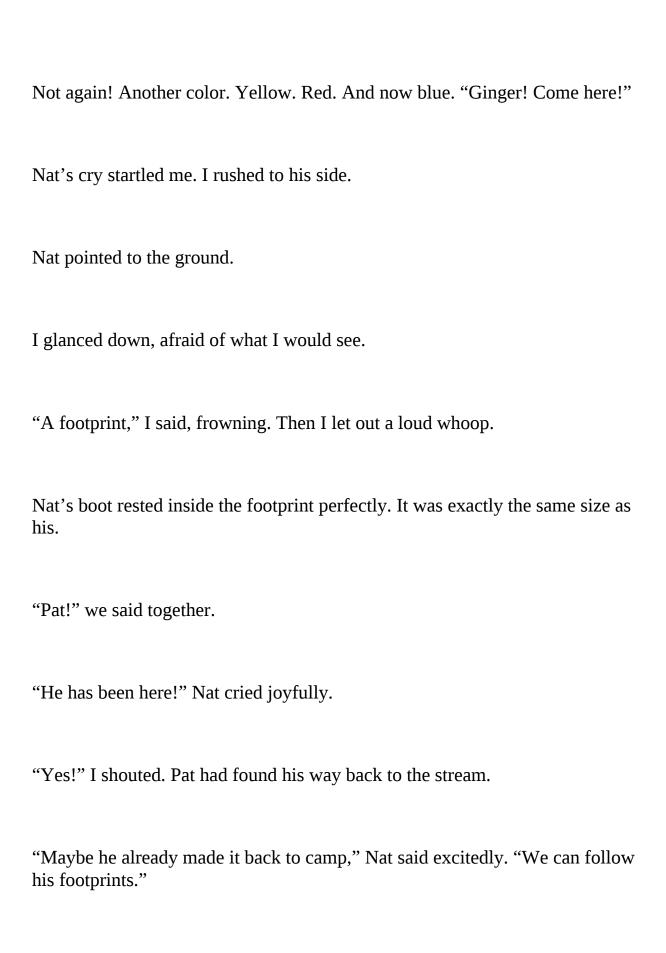
I had no idea if Pat was still in the woods or not. I hoped he had made it back to our camp. But he could be anywhere. Maybe hiding someplace nearby, alone and scared.

Thinking about how scared Pat might be made me feel braver. We had to stay calm so we could help Pat.

Nat and I crouched down. W§ scooted along the stream, pushing through the umbrella bushes that grew close to the water's edge.

I could still see the silvery-blue fish circling below the surface of the water.

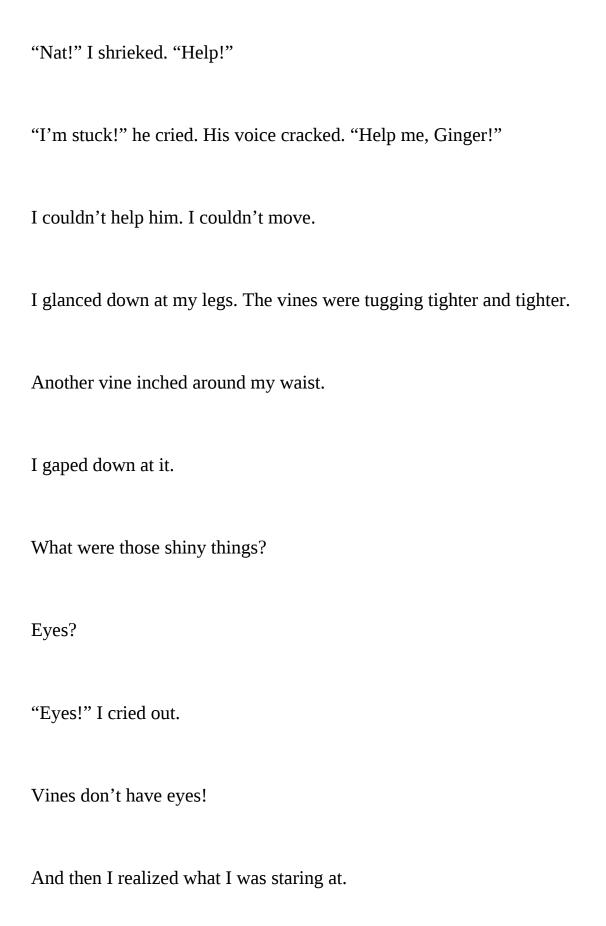
Gazing at the fish, I stumbled. I grabbed at a leaf on an umbrella bush to steady myself. The leaf shredded in my hand. Blue sap smeared over my fingers.



We started out eagerly. With each step I pictured Mom and Dad and Pat's smiling faces when Nat and I showed up at camp.
Pat's footprints marched along the stream for a while. Then they veered into the woods.
We followed them through the trees and found ourselves on a narrow path. The trees grew closer together here.
Overhead, the sun disappeared from view.
The air grew damp and cold.
I heard a familiar growl.
Right behind us.
The ground shook.
"Beasts!" I screamed. "Run!"
I pushed Nat forward. We sprinted down the path. It curved to the right and then

back to the left. I had no idea which direction we were going now.
Branches of trees whipped our faces. I struggled to shove them aside. The trees swayed and shook above our heads. Gourds hit the ground all around us.
Something warm and wet tangled itself around my arm. I yanked free. Another wet thing grabbed me.
Vines.
Thick yellow vines.
Some draped over the branches of the trees, dangling onto the forest floor. Others sprouted from the tree trunks. They wrapped around each other, weaving thick nets from tree to tree.
Some vines stretched across the path. Nat and I had to jump and twist, leaping over the vines in our way.
It was hard work. I could hear Nat breathing hard.
My side ached. My breath came in short, sharp bursts.



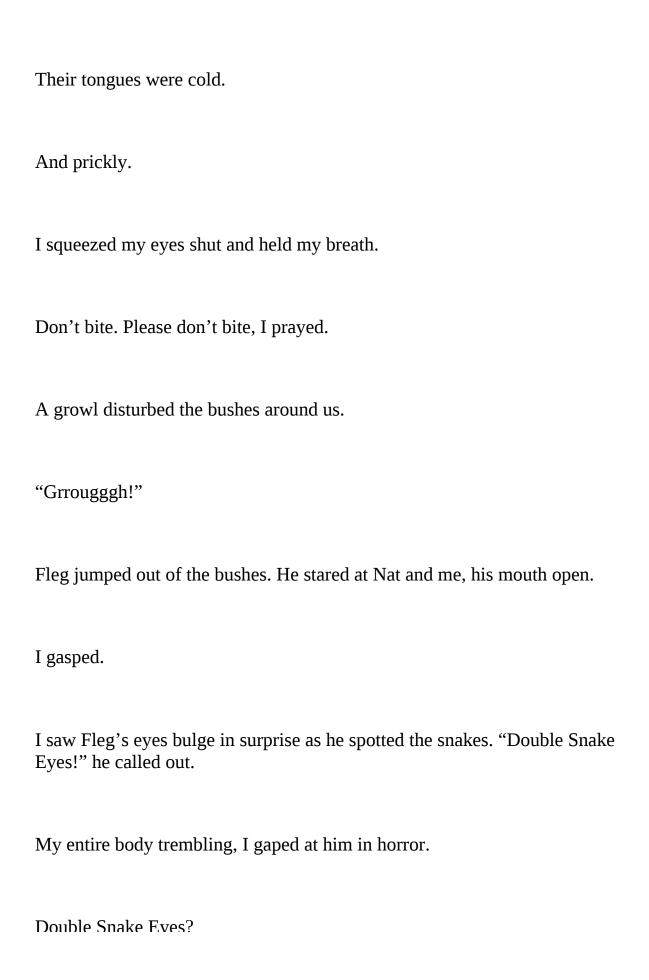


The vines weren't vines.

They were snakes.







Was that good — or bad?

"Congratulations! Double Snake Eyes!" Fleg cried. He shook his head in wonder. "And you said you never played this game before!"

The snakes tightened around me.

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?" I choked out.

"Twenty points — that's what I'm talking about." The huge beast grunted. "I'd better play harder. Or you're going to win!"

"Who cares about winning!" I screamed. "I can't breathe! Get these snakes off!"

Fleg grinned. "Off!" he screamed with laughter. The folds of skin under his jaw flapped up and down. "That's a good one."

"We mean it," Nat pleaded. "Get them off us!"

Fleg seemed confused. "Why?" He asked. "They might bite you."

"We know!" I screamed. "Help us — please!"

. .

The snakes flicked their tongues against my cheek. My stomach lurched.

Fleg grinned. "If they bite you, you could be awarded a Triple Hisser," he explained. "Worth sixty points."

Points for getting bitten. Some game!

"Forget the points!" I shrieked. "Get — them — off. Now!"

Fleg shrugged. "Okay."

He stepped up to me. Then he pushed a claw under the snake that was coiled around my arm. "You need claws to do this right," he bragged.

Fleg scratched his claw along the snake's skin.

I could feel the snake loosen its grip.

"They're ticklish," Fleg explained. He yanked the snake away and tossed it into the woods.

He tickled the other snake, then pulled it from around my leg. Then he turned to Nat and repeated the same motions, tickling the snakes and prying them loose.
When Fleg was done, he leaped toward the edge of the woods.
I struggled to my feet and rubbed my arms and legs. My whole body itched and tingled. I knew I'd see those snakes in my dreams!
Fleg stuck his furry head out from behind a tree.
"You could have tagged me," he called. "Too bad!"
He opened his mouth in a gagging laugh. Then he plunged into the woods and disappeared.
My mouth dropped open. I stared after him in disbelief.
"Tag!" Nat cried. "Now I get it. It's just like tag. The rules are easy, Ginger." He turned to face me. "Touch one of the beasts, and you won't be It anymore. You won't be the Beast from the East!"
Nat took off, running after Fleg.

"Mait Mat!" I started after him I stanged on comothing hard I heard a granch

vvait, ivat: I started after iiiii. I stepped on something nard. I neard a Clunch.

Another crunch. I glanced down.

"Nat! Stop!" I screamed. I spotted an orange rock at my feet. I picked it up and hurled it after Nat. "Hey — stop!"

I glanced down at my hand. Orange. My fingers had turned orange where they had grasped the rock.

The rock smacked into a tree trunk. Nat stopped. Whirled around. "What did you do that for?" he cried.

"To stop you," I answered.

"Listen, Ginger," Nat urged. "You have to tag one of the beasts. It's the only way to win the game. To stay alive."

"I don't think so," I said as calmly as I could.

Nat scowled. "What's your problem? It's just like tag."

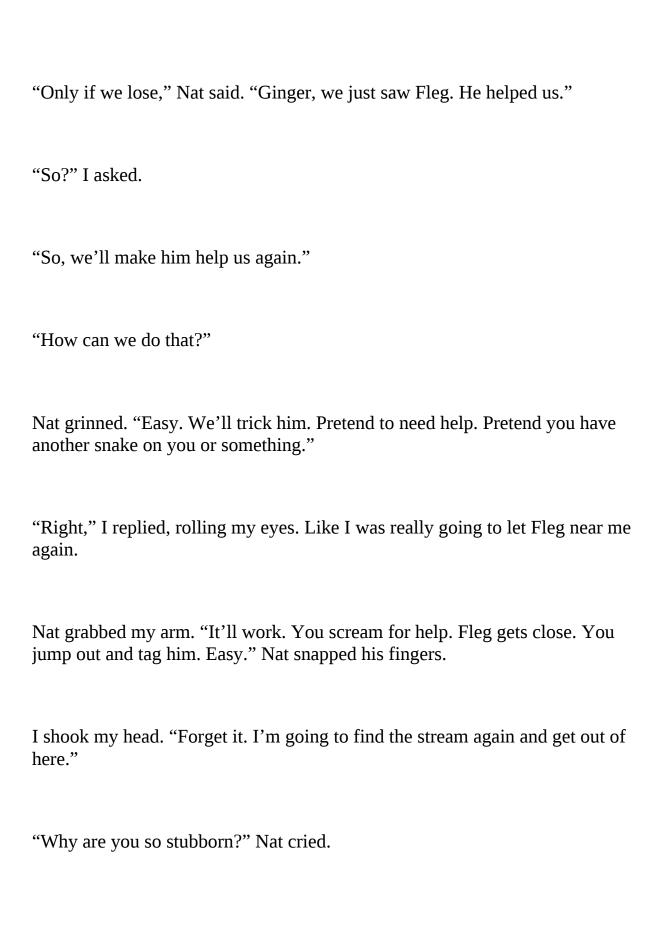
"No," I said. "This is not just like tag. Not the game that we used to play."

I pointed at the ground.

Nat stepped closer. He gazed down to where I was pointing.

He gasped. "What is that?" he asked.





"Because I'm It!" I screamed. "I'm the one they're going to eat!"

"I-I know we can win if we try," Nat stammered.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to get rid of the panic in my chest.

"Okay," I said finally. "Okay. Okay. I'll try it. What should I do?"

Nat beamed at me. "First I'll climb a tree," he said. "I can spot the beasts' hiding places from up there."

I gazed up at the tall, leafy trees around us.

I thought about it. All we needed was to tag one beast. Any beast.

"Do it," I told Nat. "But don't stay up there too long."

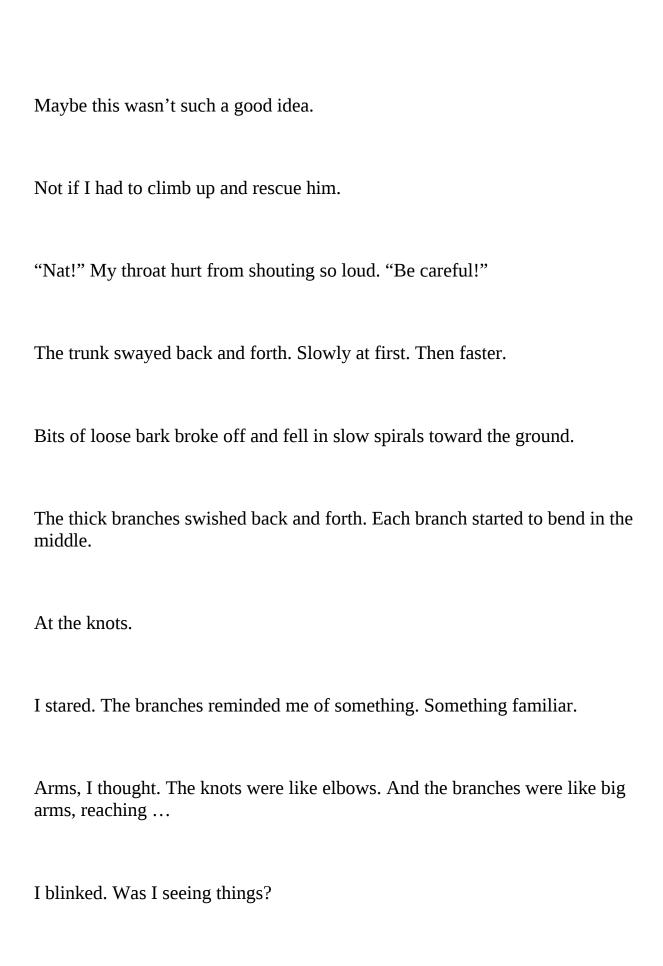
Nat searched the woods for the best tree. "That one," he said finally.

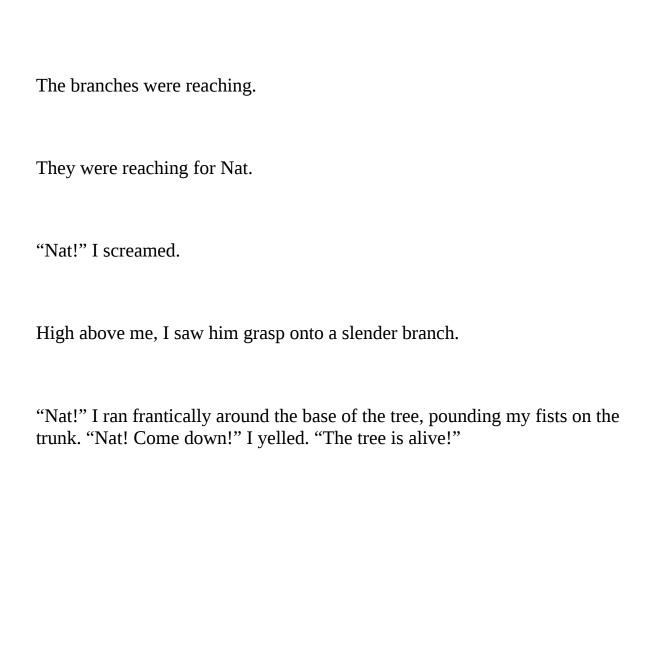
The tree was tall. Dozens of sturdy branches sprang from its sides. In the center of each branch was a big, strong knot. Tiny golden leaves covered the branches. The tree looked strong, strong enough to hold Nat.

"This is a cinch," he assured me. "As easy as climbing a ladder. I'll be able to see everything from up there."

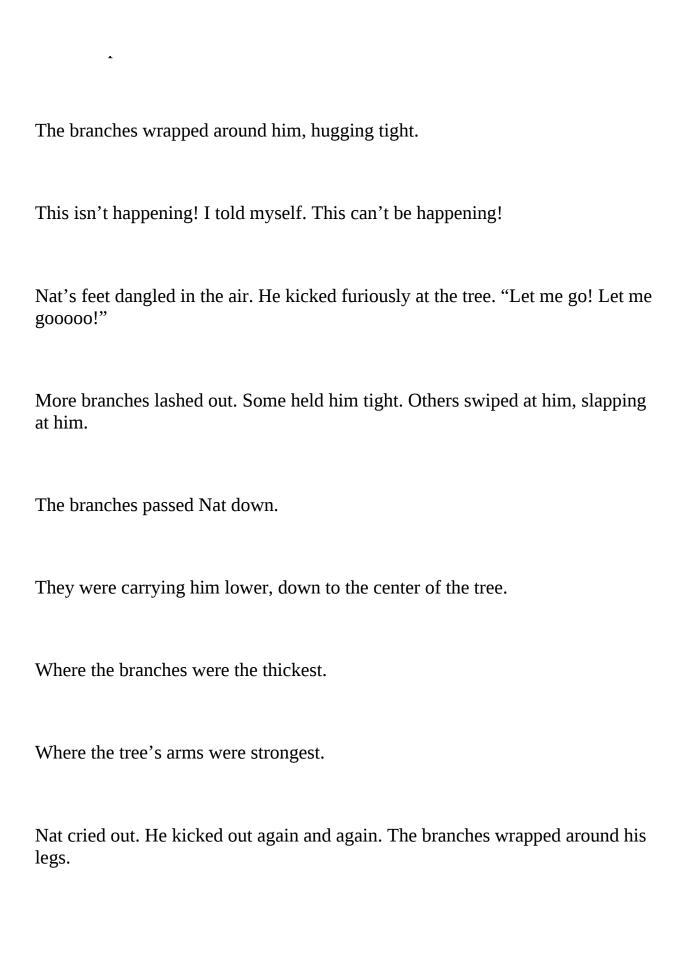
I waited near the base of the tree.

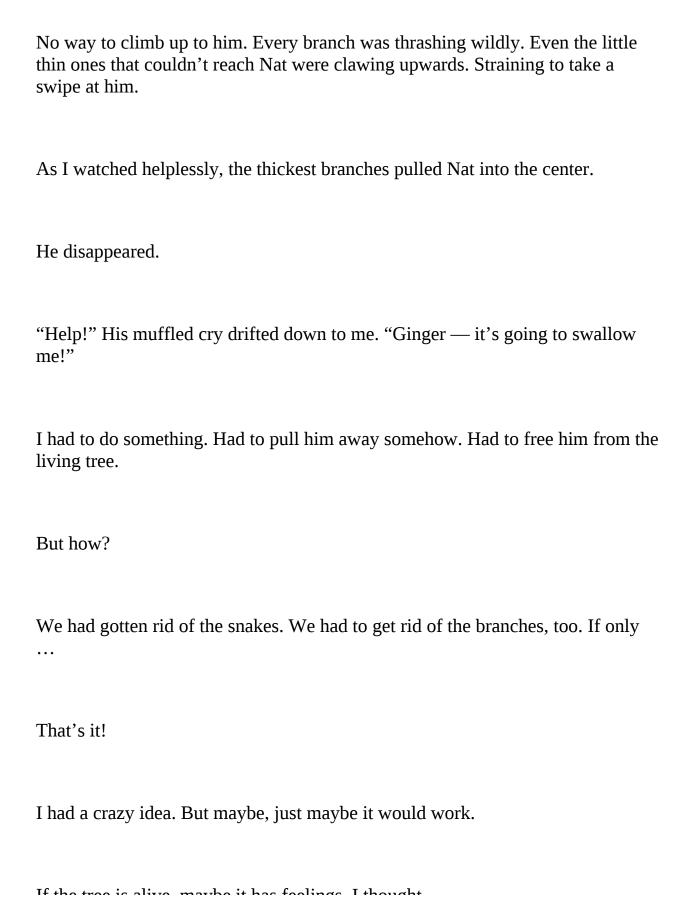












II uie uee is alive, maybe it has reemigs, i mought.
And if it has feelings, maybe it's ticklish — just as the snakes were!
"Ginger! Help!" Nat's cries grew weaker.
I knew I didn't have much time.
I leaped at the tree. A branch dipped down and slapped at me.
I jumped back and scrambled around the trunk. I ducked as a thick branch swung at me.
The tree was trying to keep me away while it swallowed up my brother. But I ducked beneath the slapping limbs and branches.
Reached out. And began to tickle the rough bark.
Tickled it with one hand. Then with both.
Was that a shiver? Did the tree actually shiver?

Or did I imagine it?
Please! I silently begged. Please, please, let go of my brother.
I tickled furiously with both hands. "Nat!" I called. "Nat! Can you hear me?"
Silence.
"Nat? Nat?"
No answer.

I didn't give up. I tickled harder.

The trunk started to jiggle.

Bunches of leaves shook free and floated down. They landed in my hair and covered my arms as I jabbed and scratched at the tree trunk.

I tickled harder. The branches shook and swayed. The trunk wriggled.

Yes! I thought excitedly. It's working! I think it is ticklish!

I'll make this tree collapse with laughter!

I tickled harder. The trunk squirmed under my fingertips.

I glanced up. Nat's boots poked through the leaves.

Then his legs. His arms. His face.

The branches were shaking. Quivering and shaking.

Nat swung free. He leaped from branch to branch. His tree-climbing skills were finally coming in handy!

"Hurry!" I shouted up to him. "I can't keep this up much longer. Jump!"

Nat wriggled down the tree trunk.

"Here goes!" Nat cried. He let go of the trunk and leaped into the air.

He landed in a crouched position at my feet. "Whoa! Good job, Ginger!"

I grabbed his hand and we hurtled away from the tree.

Nat brushed twigs and leaves from his hair. "I saw some beasts!"

I bit my lip. In all the excitement over the living tree, I had forgotten we were playing a deadly game.

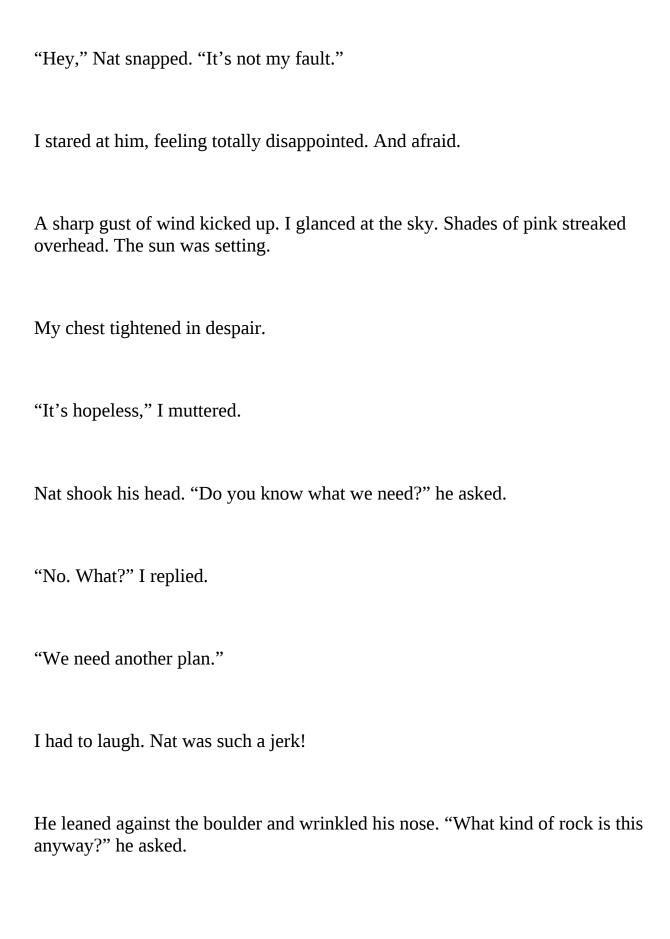
"I saw three of them," Nat reported. "Fleg, Spork, and another one with a smashed tail. That way." He pointed to the right

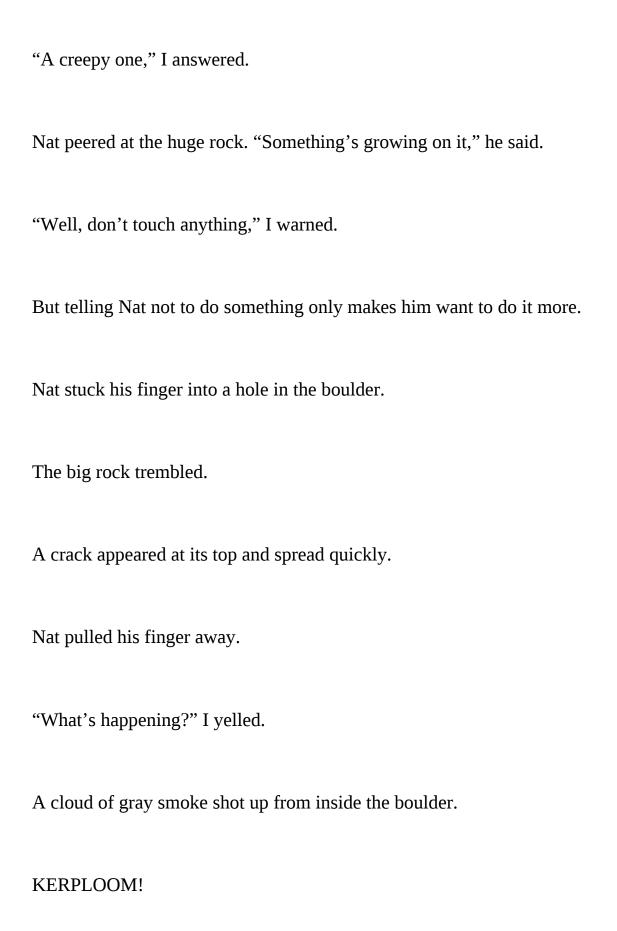


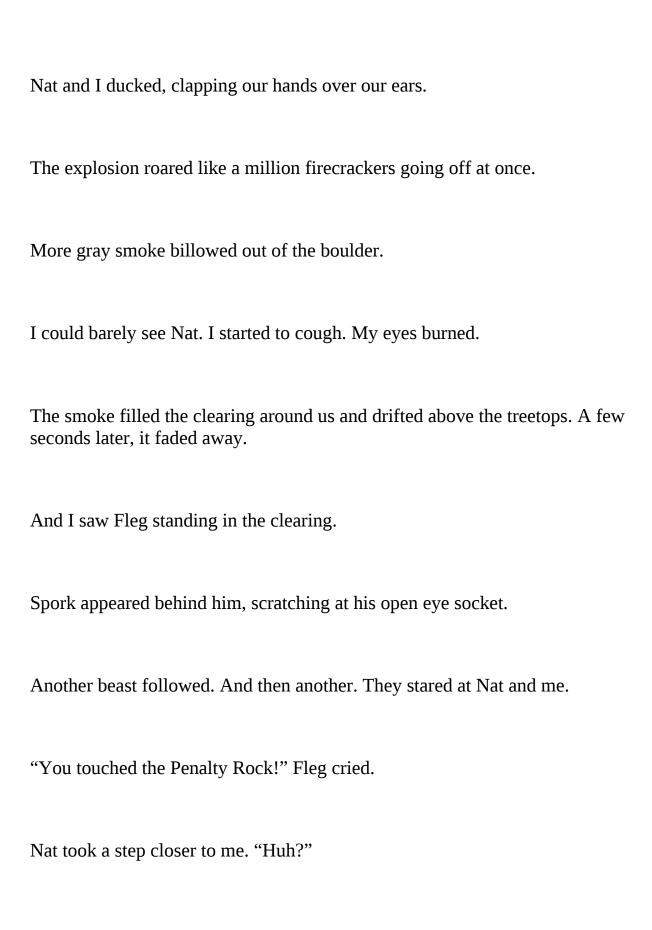


I felt a thrill of excitement. I could do it. And the game would be over. We'd be safe. I took a deep breath. "Ready or not, here I come," I whispered. I crept toward the boulder. I glanced back. Nat poked his head from behind the cabbage and flashed me a thumbs-up sign. A few more steps and I'd be at the rock. I held my breath. The gray rock rose up in front of me. I reached out. My fingers were trembling with excitement. I leaped behind the rock. "Gotcha," I cried. "You're It!"

"Huh?" My hand swiped empty air. They were gone! No beasts. Only a pile of broken gourds scattered over the ground. I blinked in surprise. And scrambled to the front of the rock. No beasts. They had moved on. "Nat!" I called. "Nat!" My brother came jogging to the boulder. "What happened?" "Nothing happened. They're gone," I told him. "Now what?"









"Yes, go," the beasts echoed. They clapped their paws again. "Let's go! Let's go!" they chanted.

I glared at Fleg. "Tell him to put my brother down."

"He touched the Penalty Rock," Fleg explained. "He must have his penalty."

"But we didn't know about it!" I protested. "We don't know any of your dumb rules. That isn't fair."

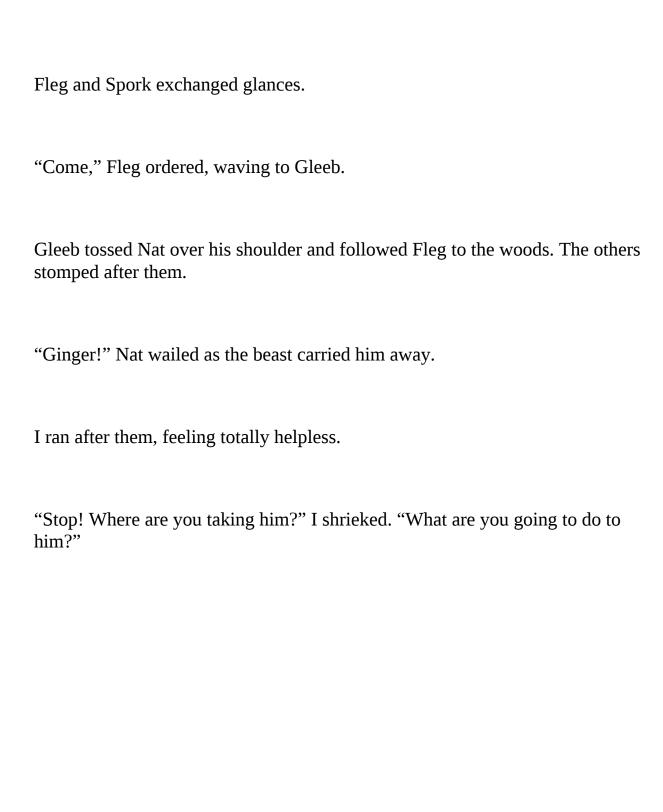
I tried to grab Nat's dangling legs.

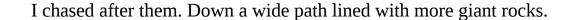
"Let me see your hand," Fleg demanded. He snatched at my arm and lifted my hand up to his eyes. He studied my palm.

"Nubloff colors!" he exclaimed. He studied me. "That's fifty points. You can't trick me. You've played this game before. You already know the rules."

I stared at my hand. Yellow sap from the stick. Blue from the leaf of the umbrella plant. Orange from the rock. Nubloff colors?

"But ... "I stammered. "I didn't get these colors on purpose. They just happened."





More penalty boulders?

I stayed in the center of the path, afraid to touch them.

The beasts stopped at the entrance to a tunnel. It was carved into the side of the largest rock I had seen. They ducked their heads and hurried inside.

I followed behind, my heart pounding.

"Ginger!" Nat's cry echoed off the tunnel walls.

The beasts growled and grunted, jabbering in excitement. Some pounded their paws on the ceiling as they moved.

Everything shook. The walls. The ceiling. The ground.

"Nat!" I cried. I couldn't hear my own voice over the noise.



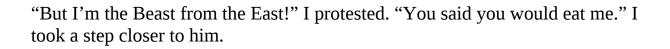
large twig into the rough wooden latch to lock the door.

Nat reached through the slats. "Ginger," he cried. "Get me out of here." The penalty box swung in the air.

"Don't worry, Nat," I called. "I'll get you out." I shivered. He seemed so small and helpless.

"You can't keep him in there forever," I told Fleg. "When does he get out?"

"When we eat him," Fleg replied softly.



"Players in the Penalty Cage get eaten, too." Fleg snorted in disgust. "Don't pretend you forgot. Everyone knows that. It's a basic rule."

"There must be another way to get him out," I said, edging closer.

"Only if he eats a Free Escape Tarantula," Fleg explained. He scratched the flab under his chin.

"Huh? He has to eat a tarantula?" I demanded, taking another step toward the beast.

Fleg narrowed his eyes. "Don't pretend you don't know that," he said, beginning to turn away.

I hurled myself at Fleg's hairy chest.

I slapped him hard.

"You're It!" I screamed. I lifted both fists in triumph. "You're It! I tagged you!"

Fleg raised an eyebrow. "Sorry," he said calmly. "I paused the game. It doesn't count."

"No!" I shrieked. "You can't! You can't keep changing the rules!"

"I didn't. Rules are rules." Fleg reached over me and checked the lock on Nat's cage. It held fast.

"Try again," Spork grunted. "You can always try again."

The rest of the beasts nodded in agreement, grinning and snorting in excitement. They were enjoying themselves. They rumbled away from the clearing.

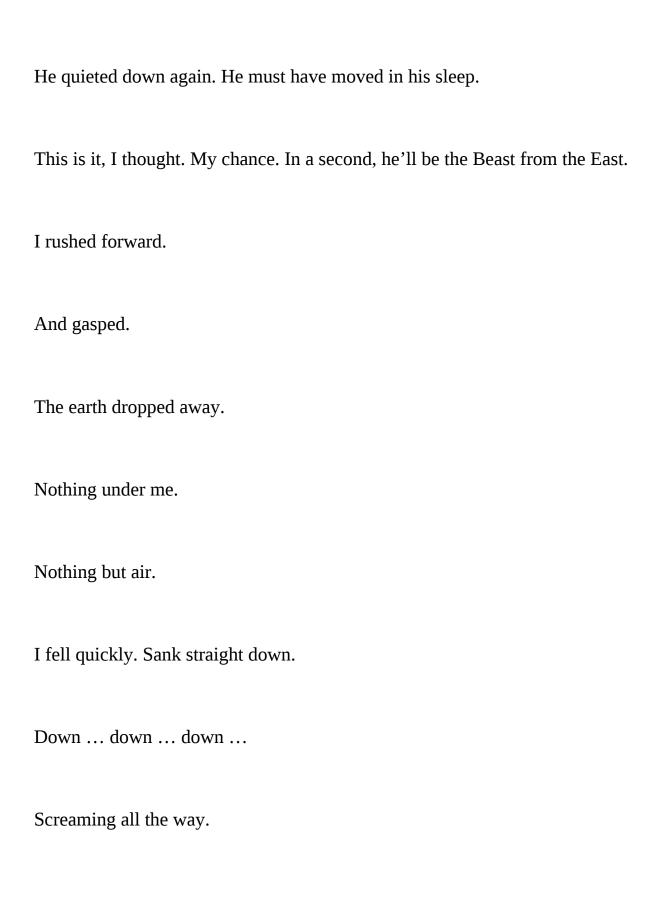
"Ginger!" Nat cried. He pounded on the box. "Get me out of here!"

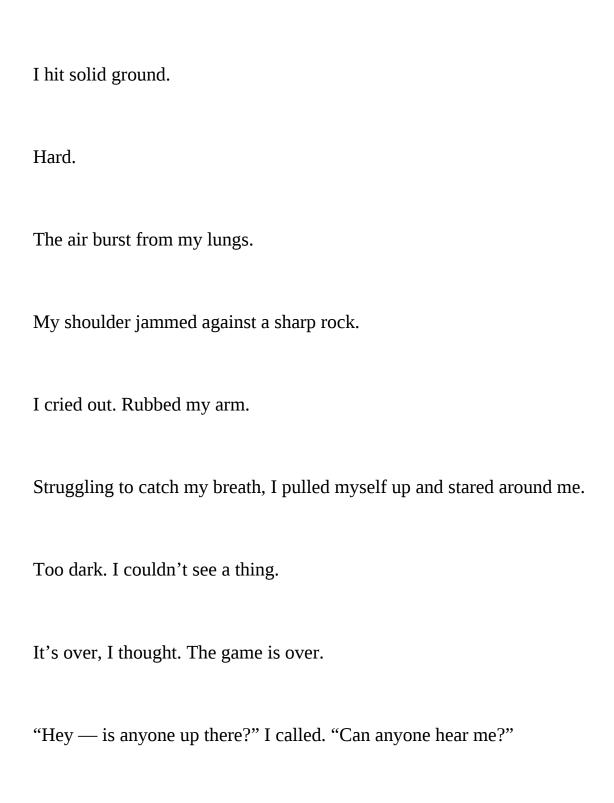
I gazed at him in despair. No way could I reach him up there.

He stared down at me through the slats. His brown hair fell into his eyes. "Do something," he pleaded.



I plunged into the darkening woods.
All around me I could hear small animals skittering through the carpet of leaves on the forest floor. As if hurrying home before sunset.
Home. Where they were safe.
The wind howled loudly through the trees. I stumbled and almost fell over a rotted tree stump.
The woods were closing in on me. Time was closing in on me.
And then I saw a beast hiding behind an umbrella bush. His shoulders slumped forward. His head bobbed gently up and down.
He was sound asleep.
Here's my chance, I thought.
I moved slowly toward him. The beast shifted position.
I stopped. Held my breath.

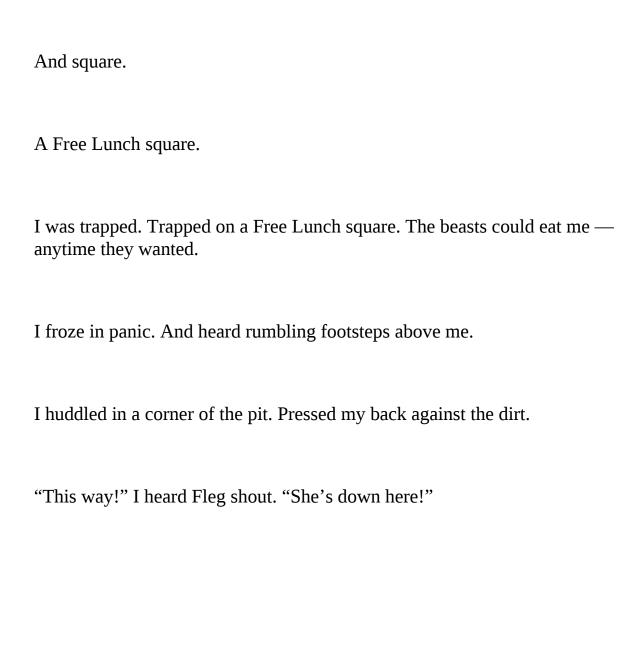






I ran my hand further up the wall. The roots were everywhere. As high up as I could feel. Perfect!
I raised my foot and stepped onto the lowest root. It held.
Footholds! I could climb out of the pit.
My hands grabbed the highest root I could reach. I pulled myself up. I heard a crumbling of loose dirt.
I pressed myself against the wall as more dirt sifted down the side of the pit, spraying my face.
I squeezed my eyes shut. Waited for the dirt to stop falling. Then I found the next root and began climbing again.
How much time did I have left? How much time before the sun went down?
My shoulder ached. But I had a long way to go. I rested briefly against the wall. Then I continued climbing.
Snap!





Fleg appeared in the opening above me. His flabby chin hung down. His eyes locked onto mine.

"Found you!" he cried.

Spork slid next to Fleg. He grinned down at me and drooled yellow drool. It splattered beside my boot.

"Something down there smells delicious!" Spork cried. "I'm soooo hungry!"

Gleeb shoved his furry face between Fleg's and Spork's.

He smacked his lips. I heard his stomach growl.

"Finally!" Spork grunted. "Pull her out! Let's eat!"

I covered my face with my hands. "Please. Don't hurt me," I cried. "I haven't done anything to you."

Fleg shrugged. "You play the game. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose."

Spork and Gleeb reached down into the pit. Their big paws swiped at me. I pressed my back tighter against the wall. "Please," I begged. "Please go away and leave me alone. You win, okay? You can have all my points." "Points can't be given away," Fleg scolded. "You know that." The others grunted in agreement. They reached down for me. My eyes searched the pit. I needed a weapon. The roots? I yanked a fat one out of the dirt. "Stay back!" I shouted, whipping the root at their paws. The beasts slapped each other on the back and laughed their ugly laugh.

"You'll be sorry," I threatened. Who was I kidding? This stupid root couldn't hurt them. And they knew it. I was the Beast from the East. I was dinner. Fleg leaned into the pit and snarled. His claws were only inches from my face. I ducked. His paw brushed against the back of my neck. I felt claws scratch my skin. I jerked away. The hair on my arms stood straight up. If only I could burrow into the earth like an animal, I thought. Fleg's paw swiped the air in front of my face. "Stop ducking away," he shouted. "You're just making me hungrier." "This isn't fair!" I screamed. He turned to Spork and Gleeb. "I'm tired of this," he complained. "Enough stalling "

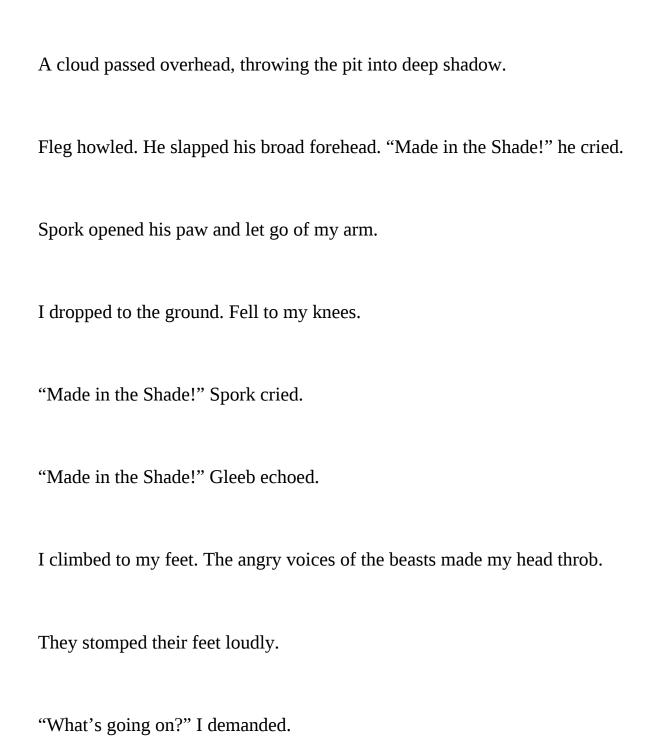
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His round eyes gleamed down hungrily at me.

"Get her!" he bellowed.

Spork leaned down and grabbed my arm. I felt his claws dig into my skin. He pulled me up and yanked me to my feet.

It's all over, I thought sadly. The game is over.

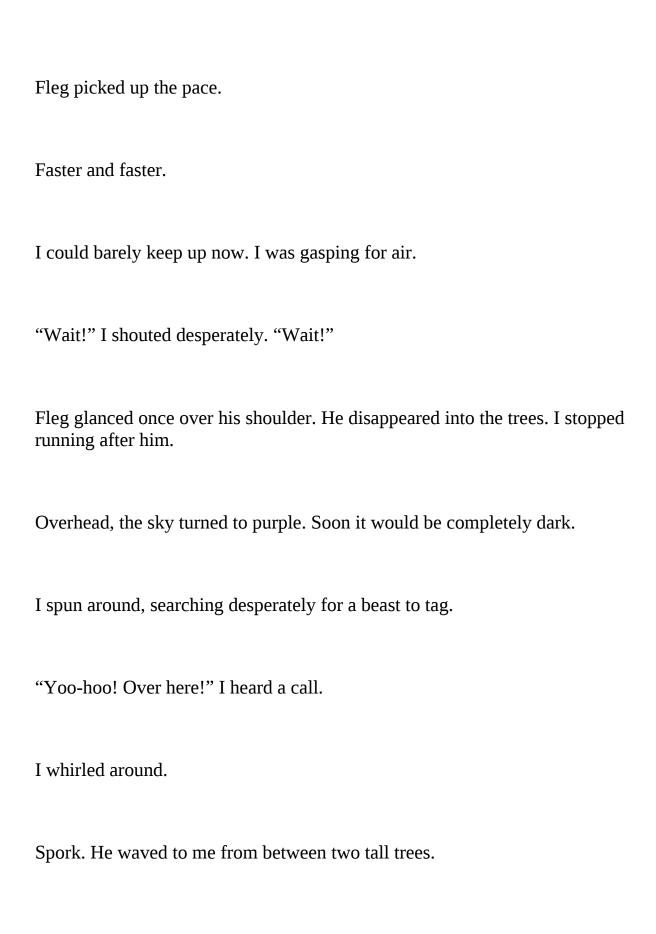


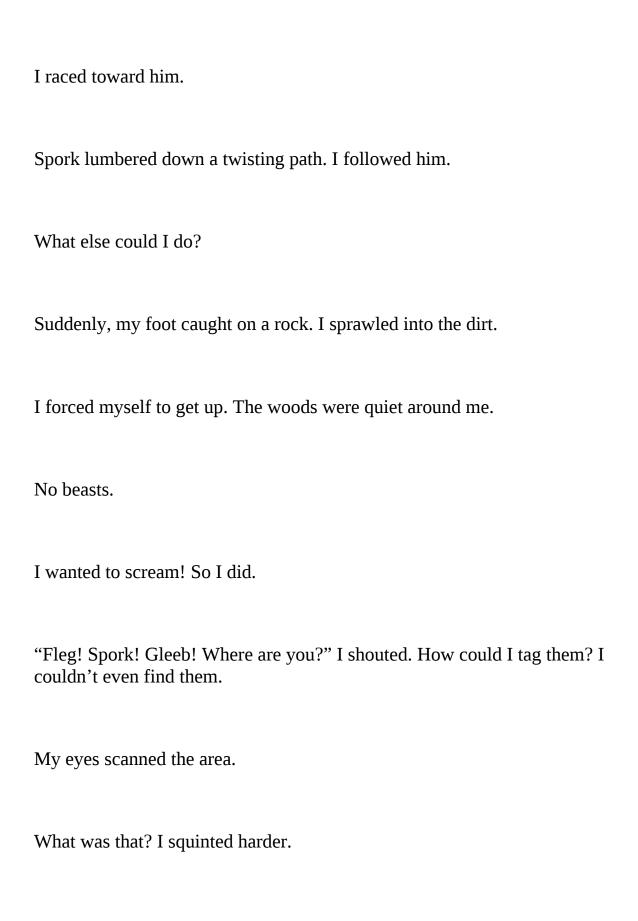
"You're safe," Spork replied, sneering in disgust. "This time." Safe? I breathed a sigh of relief. "But ... why?" I asked, amazed. "You're Made in the Shade," Fleg explained. "We can't touch you. It's a free pass. But you can only use it once." Once was enough, I hoped. I didn't plan to play this game forever. "We have to let you go this time," Fleg growled. "But you're still the Beast from the East." "You still have to tag someone before sundown," Spork agreed. Gleeb sighed. The three beasts turned to the woods. "We'll go now," Fleg announced. "Wait!" I scrambled to my feet. "How do I get out of here? How can I tag someone if I'm stuck in this pit?" Fleg rolled his eyes. He reached down and pressed one paw against a purple rock

on the ground near the edge of the nit









Yes! A blue furry head! It popped up behind a bush.

My last chance.

I gathered my energy and sprinted toward the bush.

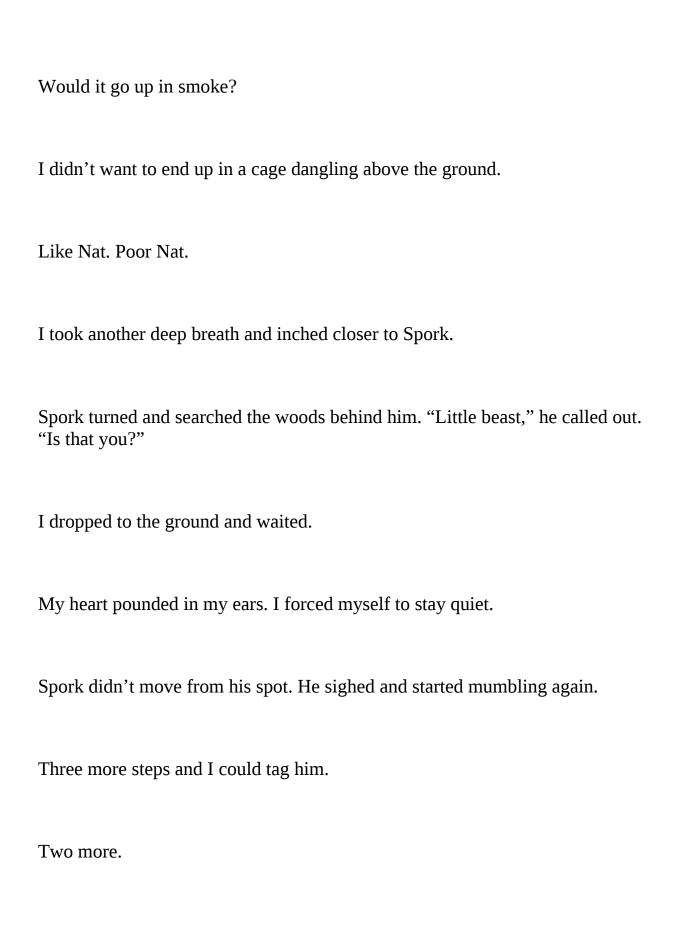
My hand reached out.

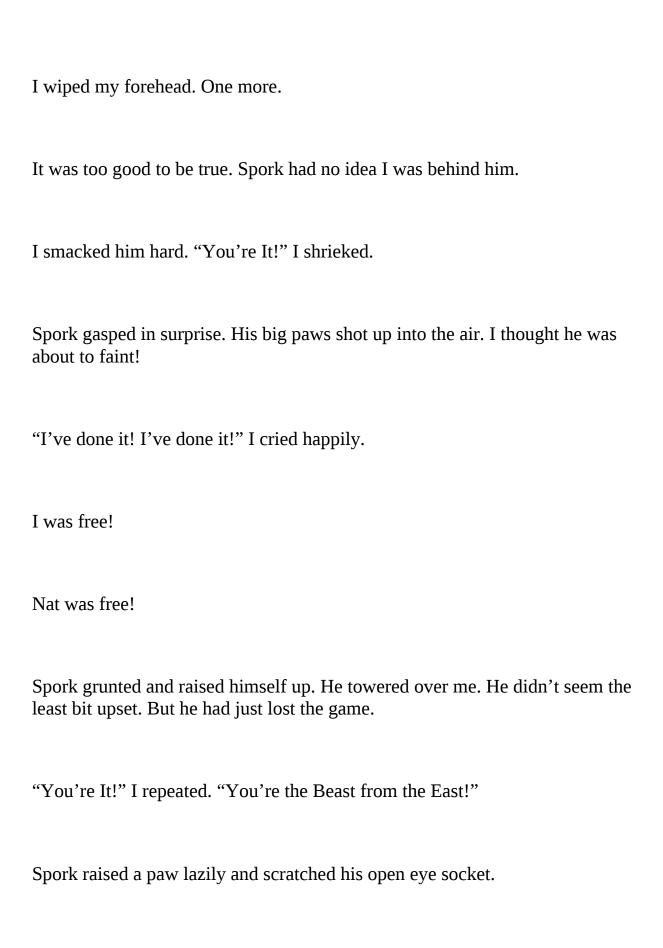
"Tag!" I yelled. "You're — "



There must be another beast nearby. A grown-up beast to watch the kid. One over three feet tall.
One I could tag.
I checked out the area. Trees and large rocks. I would have to search behind every one of them.
Taking a deep breath, I tiptoed silently through the trees. Stopped to peer behind each rock.
Crunch. My foot cracked a pile of twigs.
I stood completely still. And waited.
Silence.
I moved forward.
I listened carefully.
Silence.

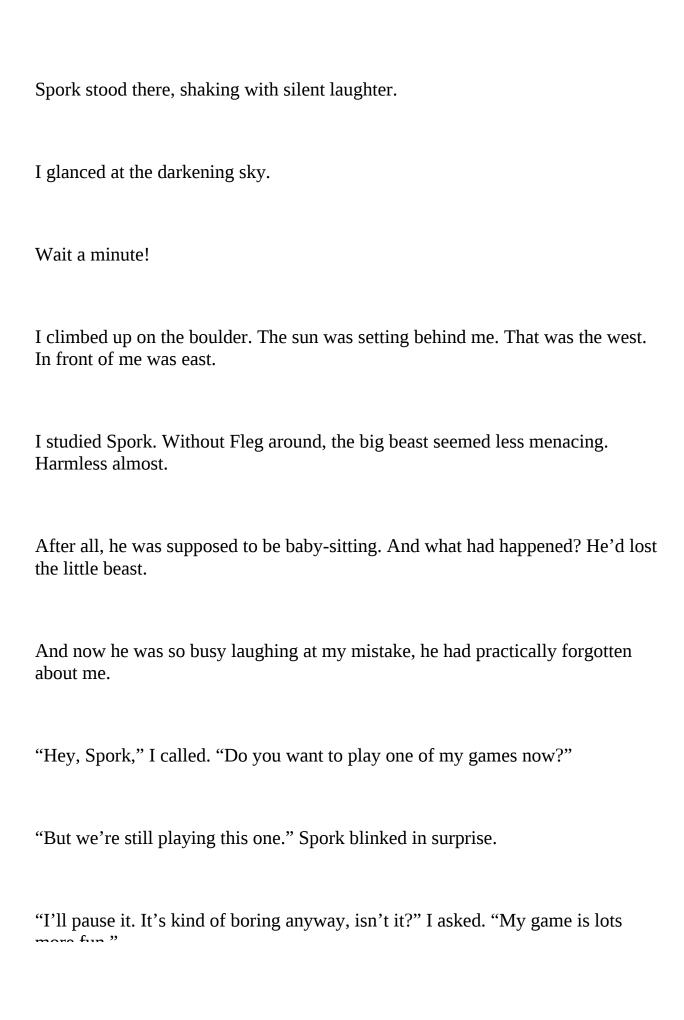
I crept forward. A beast had to be here somewhere.
But where?
Then I heard a noise.
Mumbling.
I crept behind a bush and inched closer to the sound. It came from behind a tall, jagged rock.
I peeked out.
Spork!
Yes! Spork stood behind the rock, talking to himself. He scratched the lumpy scar on his nose.
I could easily tag him.
But was this another penalty rock?





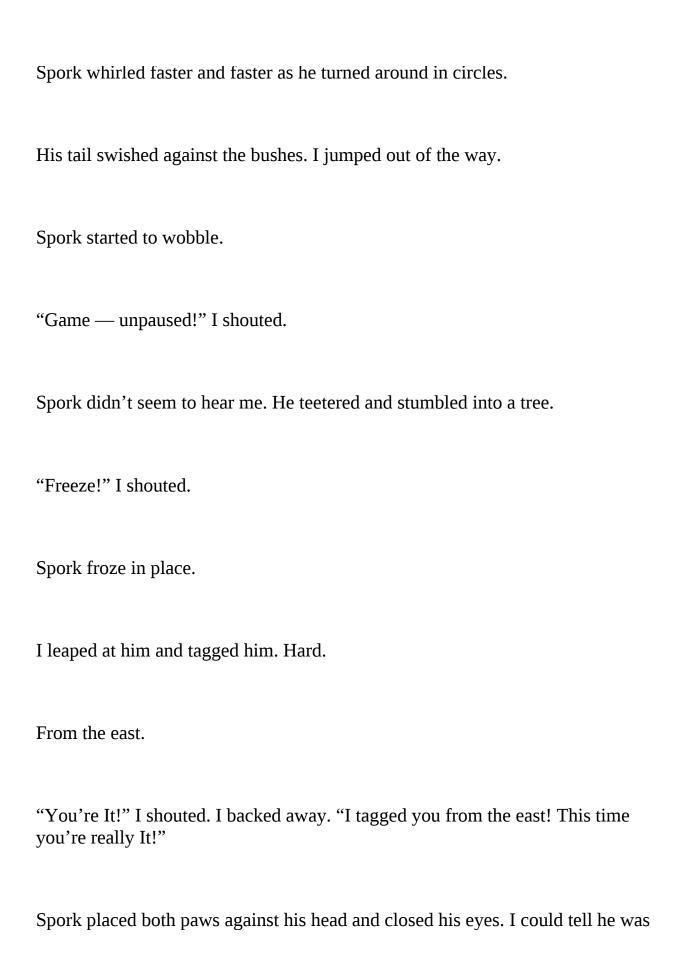
I felt a chill of fear. What if Spork refused to obey the rules?
"Sorry," Spork said softly. "Not this time."
"Hey — !" I shouted angrily. "You have to obey the rules! I tagged you, fair and square!"
Spork stared at me as if I were being very funny.
Something was wrong.
But what? What was it?
Why didn't he say something?
Spork's lips curled into a nasty grin.





more run.		

Spork scratched the hole where his eye used to be. He pulled a big, black bug out of it, and tossed the bug away. "What's your game called?"
"Freeze Frame," I answered quickly.
Nat and Pat loved to play this game.
"We spin around and when I say stop, we freeze — and see if one of us can keep our balance and not fall over."
"Sounds fun," Spork agreed. "Why not?"
"Okay then," I said. "Let's try it. Spin!" I shouted.
We both started to spin.
I peeked at Spork. His arms swung out as he whirled around.
"Faster!" I called out. "Much faster."



still dizzy. He spread his legs and balanced himself against the tree.

He bopped himself in the face with his paw. "You did it," he agreed. He ran his bumpy tongue over his lips. He exhaled a deep breath. "I'm It," he admitted.

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" I cried. I jumped up in excitement.

Spork plopped down against the boulder.

"I'm free!" I shrieked. "The game is over." I clenched my hand into a fist and pumped my arm.

"I'm going to rescue Nat," I said. "Which way is he?"

Spork pointed his clawed finger to my right.

"We're outta here!" I shouted.

I'd never been so happy in all my life.

"Well, Spork old pal," I said, beaming at him. "This is good-bye. See you!"

"Not so quick," Spork said. "I'm afraid you can't leave."

"Forget it," I said. "You can't change the rules again! No way."

"You can't leave," he repeated. "The game continues until sunset." He glared at me stubbornly.

I gazed at the sky. The purple was fading to gray. Not much time left. But enough.

I wasn't going to be It again.

I could hide until dark. But where?

"Don't just stand there," Spork warned. "You could be tagged again."

"Never," I insisted. "I won't let that happen."

Before I could move, Fleg stomped from behind a tree. The flabby skin under his chin swung from side to side.

Gleeb crept behind him.

"She tagged me!" Spork told them. "I knew it!" Fleg stared at me. "I knew you played this game before." I balled my hands into fists. I was angry. I'd had enough. They forced me to play their stupid game. But I wasn't going to lose now. Fleg waved me away. "You have until I count to trel," he said. "Then we're allowed to come after you again." He turned his back and covered his eyes. "Gling ... proo ... zee ... freen ... trel," he counted. I had no choice. I ran. Don't stop, I told myself. Don't think about anything. Run. Find a place to hide.

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"Ready or not — here we come!" I heard Fleg cry.

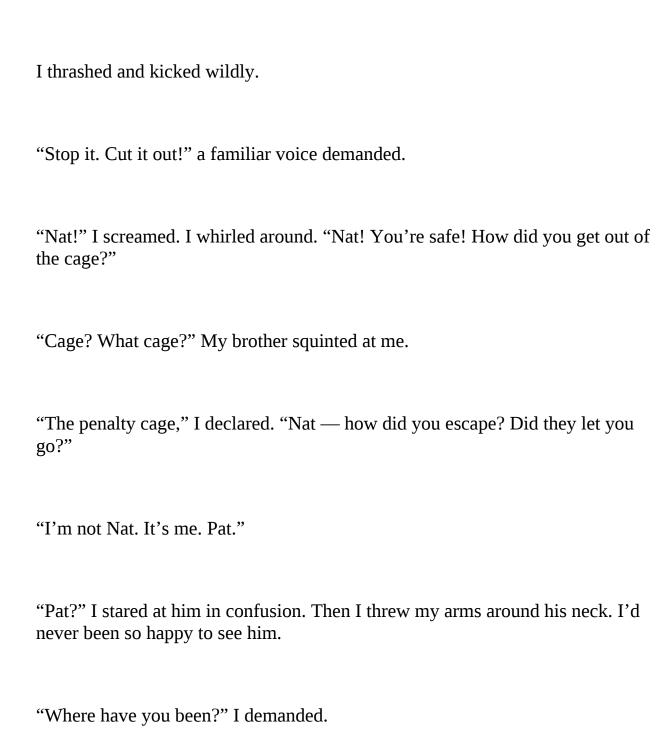
I hurled myself off the path and pushed through the tall, scratchy grass between the trees. I jumped over a clump of cabbage plants. My legs ached. My feet burned. But I couldn't stop. Not until I reached a hiding place. I skidded to a stop when I heard rushing water. I nearly fell into the stream. A large blue fish leaped out of the water and snapped at my ankles. This was no place to hide. I turned back into the woods. A cold wind blew in my face. The gourds whistled their strange melody. "Here I come!" Spork shouted off to my left. I pushed myself faster. No way he was going to tag me.

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"Where have I been?" Pat cried. "Where have you been? I've been searching

everywhere for you guys. These woods are creepy."

He glanced around. "Where's Nat, anyway?"

"Trapped." I started to explain. "See, the beasts got him. After you ran into the woods, we had to play this game and ..."

"A game?" Pat cried. He shook his head in disbelief. "I was lost in the woods — and you two are playing a game?"

"It's not what you think," I said.

I checked the trees around us for any sign of the creatures.

"They forced us to play," I told Pat, lowering my voice to a whisper. "It's like tag — only they play for keeps. I was the Beast from the East and — "

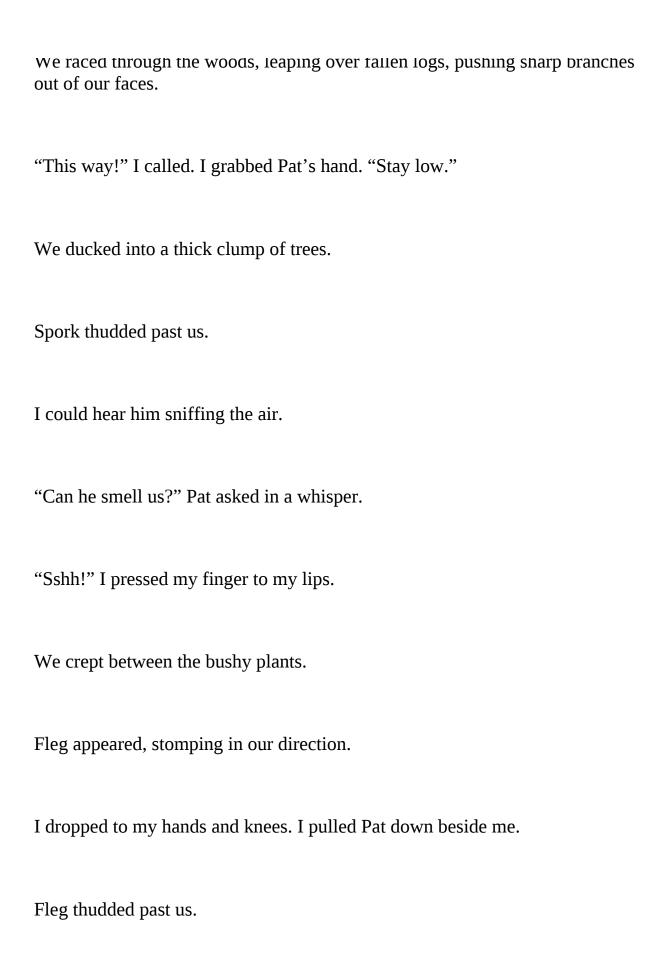
"Right." Pat rolled his eyes.

"Really," I insisted. "This game is deadly. You have to believe me."

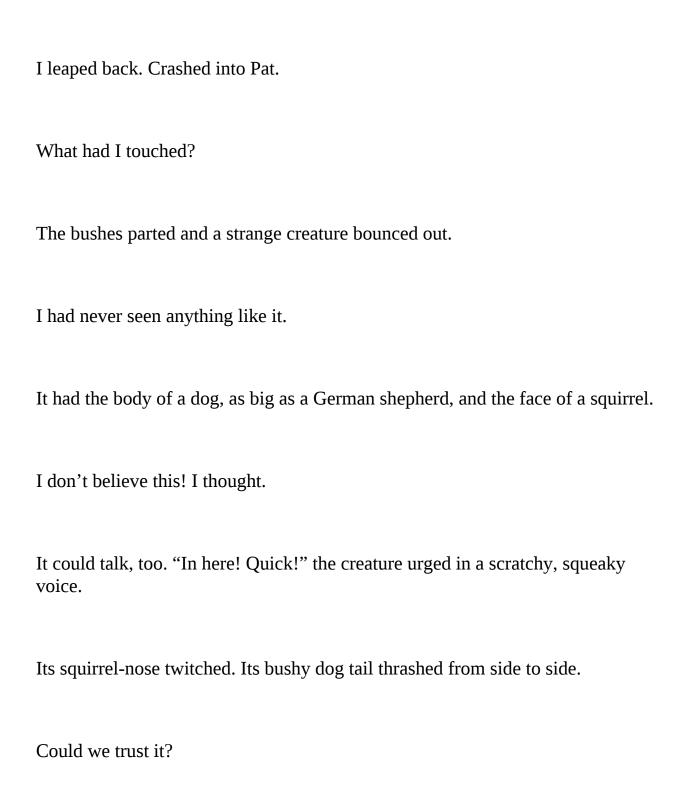
"Why?" Pat shrugged. "You never believe me. Why should I believe you?"



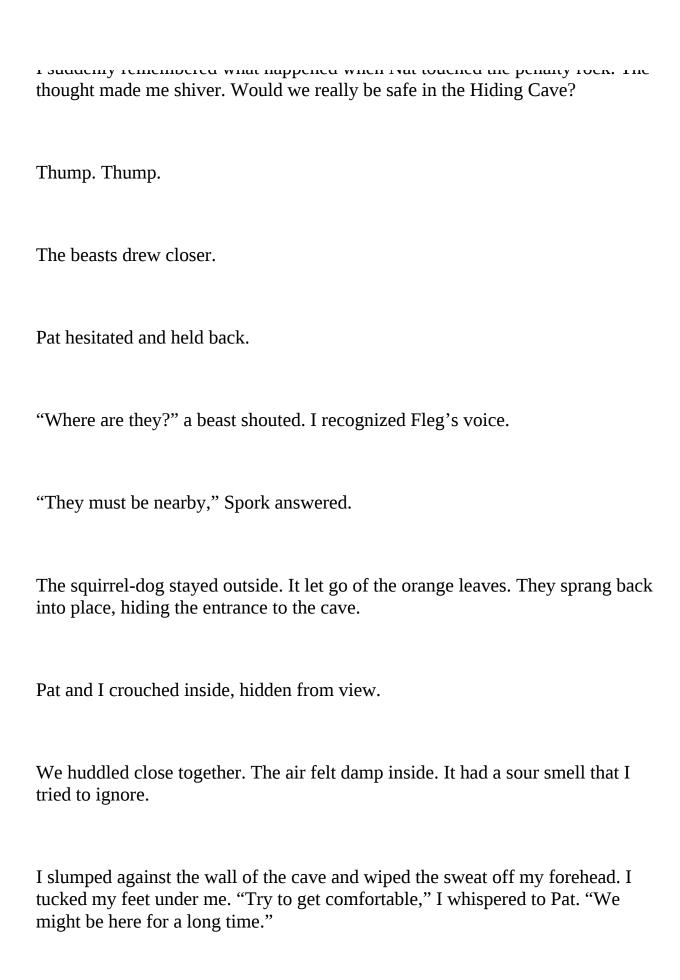




I knew we weren't safe. More beasts would follow. And one of them might find us.
I motioned for Pat to follow me.
We scrambled deeper into the woods.
The trees were close together here. The bushes were so thick I couldn't see between them. I flung out an arm, feeling my way.
My hand brushed against something.
Something big.
And warm.
And furry.

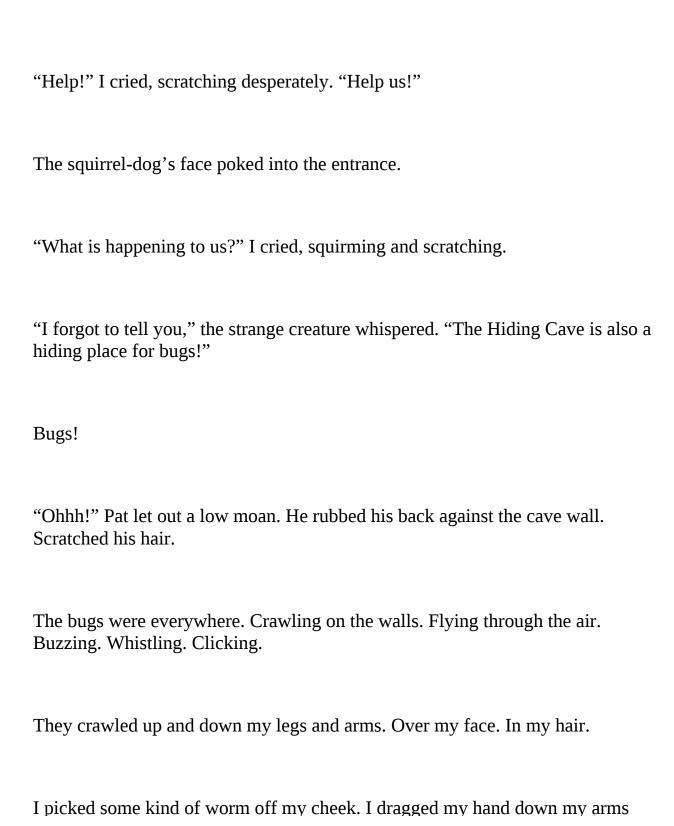








I leaped to my feet. "Help!" I cried. "What is happening? What is going on in here?"



and my bare legs, brushing bugs onto the cave floor.

Pat squirmed next to me. "Get them off me, Ginger," he wailed. "Helllp!"

"Sshhh!" The squirrel-dog stuck his nose back into the cave. "Quiet! Here comes the Beast from the East. Don't make a sound or he'll find you!"

Pat and I drew closer together.

I held my breath and tried not to move.

I counted to ten. Silently. I pretended there were no bugs on me.

I shut my eyes and pictured my bedroom. The posters on the wall. My comfortable canopy bed. I thought of being under the covers. Going to sleep.

And then I thought about bedbugs!

I couldn't ignore the insects crawling over me. It was impossible not to think about them.

I couldn't stand it. I needed to scratch. I needed to scream!



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My mouth opened.

I had to scream. I had to!

"Ah — "

I clamped my hand over my mouth.

I let out a tiny squeak.

The orange leaves rustled. Fleg's paw pushed into the cave entrance.

I froze. I heard Pat gasp.

"What's in there?" I heard Fleg ask the squirrel-dog.

"Bugs," the squirrel-dog replied. "Thousands of them."

Millions! I thought bitterly. The bugs crawled over my face, my arms, my legs. They buzzed in my ears.

Fleg pushed his nose into the cave.



was nearly over. If Spork didn't tag me back, my brothers and I would be free!

But I couldn't take another second in this bug-infested cave.

I moved to the entrance on trembling legs. I itched so badly, I could barely control my muscles!

I peered out of the cave. "Are they all gone?" I whispered to the squirrel-dog.

"For now," he answered.

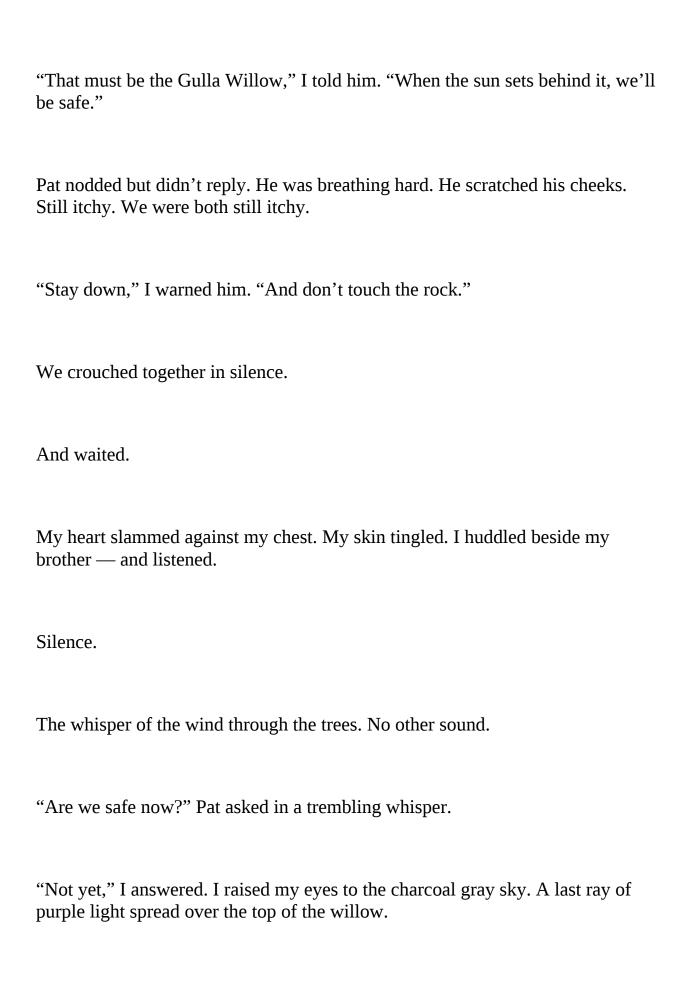
"Let's get out of here!" I called back to Pat. I sprang out of the cave. He jumped out after me.

We frantically brushed bugs off our skin and clothes. I scratched my head and rubbed my back up against a tree.

Pat stomped his feet. "They're even in my boots!" he wailed. He untied his laces and pulled off his boot. He shook it upside down. A hundred black bugs poured onto the ground and scurried away.

"I'm never going to stop itching!" I wailed. "I'm going to itch for the rest of my life!"

"You'd better hide," the squirrel-dog warned. "They could be back. And you're only allowed to use the Hiding Cave once a game."
Pat and I thanked the strange creature. Then we plunged back into the woods.
I hadn't been in this part of the forest before. Pat and I pushed our way past a row of high bushes. I stopped.
A giant willow tree stood up ahead. Its branches spread low, sweeping against the ground.
The Gulla Willow?
It had to be.
I glanced around, searching for a hiding place. A long, low rock stretched beyond the tree.
Only a few minutes left.
"Quick," I whispered, grabbing Pat. I pulled him behind the rock.



Hurry! I urged the sun. Go down! What are you waiting for?
The sky darkened. The purple light faded behind the Gulla Willow.
Only gray sky now. Night sky.
The sun was down.
"We're safe!" I cried, jumping to my feet. I turned and hugged Pat. "We're safe! We made it."
I stepped out from behind the rock.
A heavy hand slapped me hard. On the shoulder.
"You're It!" Spork bellowed. "You're the Beast from the East!"

"Huh?"

I gasped in shock. I could still feel the beast's stinging slap on my shoulder.

"No fair!" Pat cried. "No fair!" He stared as the beasts circled us. Pat had never seen them close-up before.

"It's dark! The sun is down!" I protested. "You can't tag me now!"

"Game Over!" Fleg shouted. He stepped out of the woods and hurried toward the circle of beasts.

I pointed angrily at the Gulla Willow. "The sun set behind the tree. You can't tag me!"

"The game hadn't been called yet," Spork said calmly. "You know the rule. Fleg has to shout out 'Game Over' before the game can end."

The beasts all murmured agreement.

I clenched my fists. "But ... "I stammered. I lowered my head in defeat. I knew they wouldn't listen to me.

Pat gulped. "What will they do now, Ginger?" he whispered softly. "Will they hurt us?"

"I already told you," I whispered back. "They're going to eat us."

Pat let out a cry. He started to say something. But there wasn't time.

Fleg stepped forward and grabbed me by the waist. He tossed me over his shoulder.

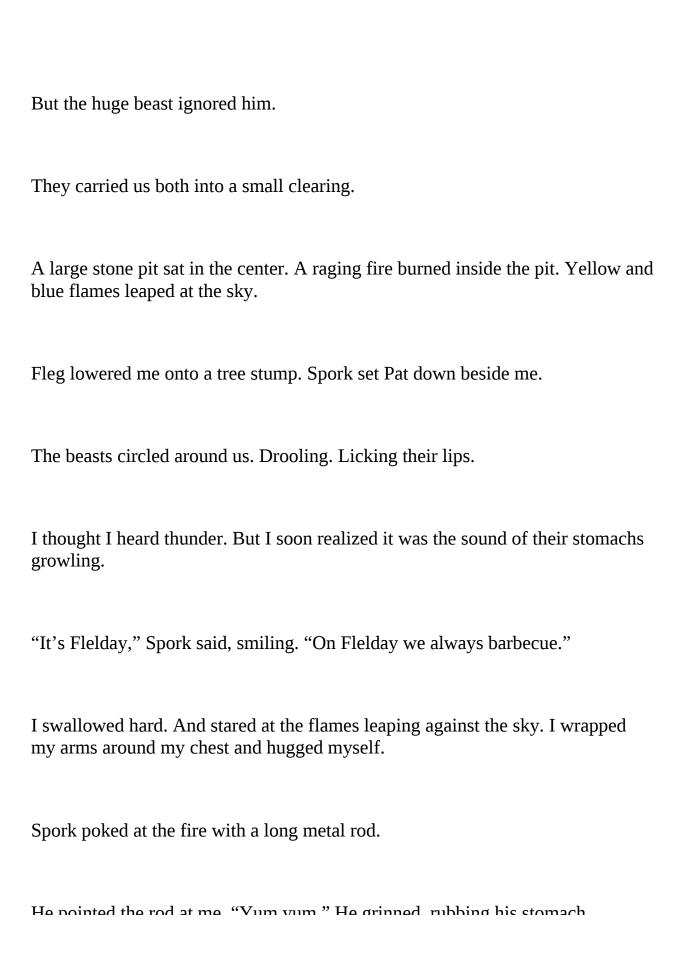
The blood rushed to my head and I felt dizzy. The ground was so far away!

Spork hoisted Pat over his shoulder.

"Hey — whoa!" I protested. "Put my brother down!"

"He was your Helper," Spork replied. "We always eat the Helper, too!"

"Put me down!" Pat shrieked. "Let me go."





Fleg lifted me in his arms. And carried me toward the cooking pot.

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"Whoa! Wait! Stop!"
A familiar voice shouted across the clearing.
I jerked my head around. "Nat!" I screamed.
"Ginger!" Nat cried. He ran toward us, waving his arms. "What's going on?
What are they doing?"
Fleg lowered me to the ground. "Nat —!" I screamed. "Run! Find help! Hurry!"
He stopped halfway across the clearing. "But, Ginger — "
"They'll eat you, too," I shrieked. "Run!"
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Gleeb and several others took off after Nat.

"Capture him!" Spork shouted to the other beasts.

Nat spun around. He darted for the woods and disappeared into the trees.
I watched helplessly as the beasts plunged into the woods after him.
Don't find him, I prayed, crossing my fingers. All ten of them!
Nat will escape, I told myself. He'll climb a tree. He'll get away from them. Then he'll run and find help.
Pat and I stared at the dark trees. And waited.
"Oh, nooo!" I uttered a long wail when the beasts returned from the woods. And one of them carried Nat over his shoulder.
Nat kicked and punched. But he couldn't free himself.
The beast dumped Nat beside Pat and me. Nat landed hard, face-down on the ground.
Now they had all three of us. A feast!
Snork and Flag gazad at us hungrily. Glaph ran his tongua over his long fang

opona ana i neg gazea at as nanginiy. Onceo tan ms tongae over ms tong tang.

I dropped down beside Nat. "How did you get out?" I asked him. "How did you get out of that cage?"

Nat rolled over and sat up. "It wasn't that hard," he said, groaning. "The boards were weak. I worked and worked — until I pushed enough boards out. Then I broke out,"

"You should have stayed away," I told him. "You should have run. Now they're going to eat you, too."

Nat raised his eyes to the cook pot and the blazing fire. "I — I don't want to play anymore," he stammered.

"Nat," I whispered sadly, "I'm afraid the game is just about over."

"Quiet!" Fleg demanded. "Dinner — stop talking!" He stared at Nat.

Fleg's eyes narrowed. He tilted his head. He whispered to Spork and Gleeb.

The other beasts moved closer. They were all moving their eyes from Pat to Nat. They began murmuring to each other, shaking their big, furry heads. Their snouts waved up and down as they talked.

"You doubled!" Spork said to Pat. "You did a Classic Clone!"

I stared at the beasts. Studied their startled expressions. Hadn't they ever seen twins before?

"You doubled yourselves!" Fleg declared. "That's a Classic Clone. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Uh ... tell you what?" I asked.

Fleg glared at me. "Why didn't you tell us that you are Level Three players?"

My brothers and I exchanged confused glances. "You're in the wrong game," Spork announced, shaking his head. "If you can double yourselves, that means you belong in Level Three," Fleg said. He slapped his furry forehead. "I'm so embarrassed! Why didn't you tell us sooner?" "Well, I told you we didn't want to play," I replied sharply. "But you wouldn't listen." "I'm so sorry," Fleg apologized. "We're only Level One players. We're just beginners. We're not experts like you." "Experts?" Pat muttered. He turned to me and rolled his eyes. "That's why we have to play in the daytime," Fleg explained. "We're not ready to play at night."

All around us, the beasts were muttering and shaking their heads.

"Of course, we'll have to let you go now," Fleg said. He scratched at his flabby chin.



We shouted good-bye — and took off. The narrow dirt path twisted through the

trees. Silvery moonlight danced over the ground.

"I am so glad you guys are twins!" I exclaimed. I had never said that before! But I really meant it. They had saved our lives! The trees thinned out. I could see a full moon climbing up over the dark treetops. I felt as if we were running to it, running into its warm, white light. "Mom and Dad will never believe this story," I said. I planned to tell them every gory detail. "They have to believe us," Pat declared. "It's all true." I put on a burst of speed. My brothers ran harder to keep up with me.

"Oh!" I gasped and skidded to a stop.

Pat and Nat stumbled into me. All three of us struggled to stay on our feet.

A huge beast had stepped out from behind a tree, blocking the path.

I couldn't wait to get back. Mom and Dad must be so worried.

He crossed his furry arms over his enormous chest. His snout flared as he stared down at us with cold marble eyes. He opened his lips and growled, exposing his long fang.

I wasn't afraid. Not this time.

"Step aside," I ordered him. "You have to let us go by. My brothers and I are Level Three players."

"You're Level Three? Hey — that's great! So am I!" the beast exclaimed. "Tag! You're It."