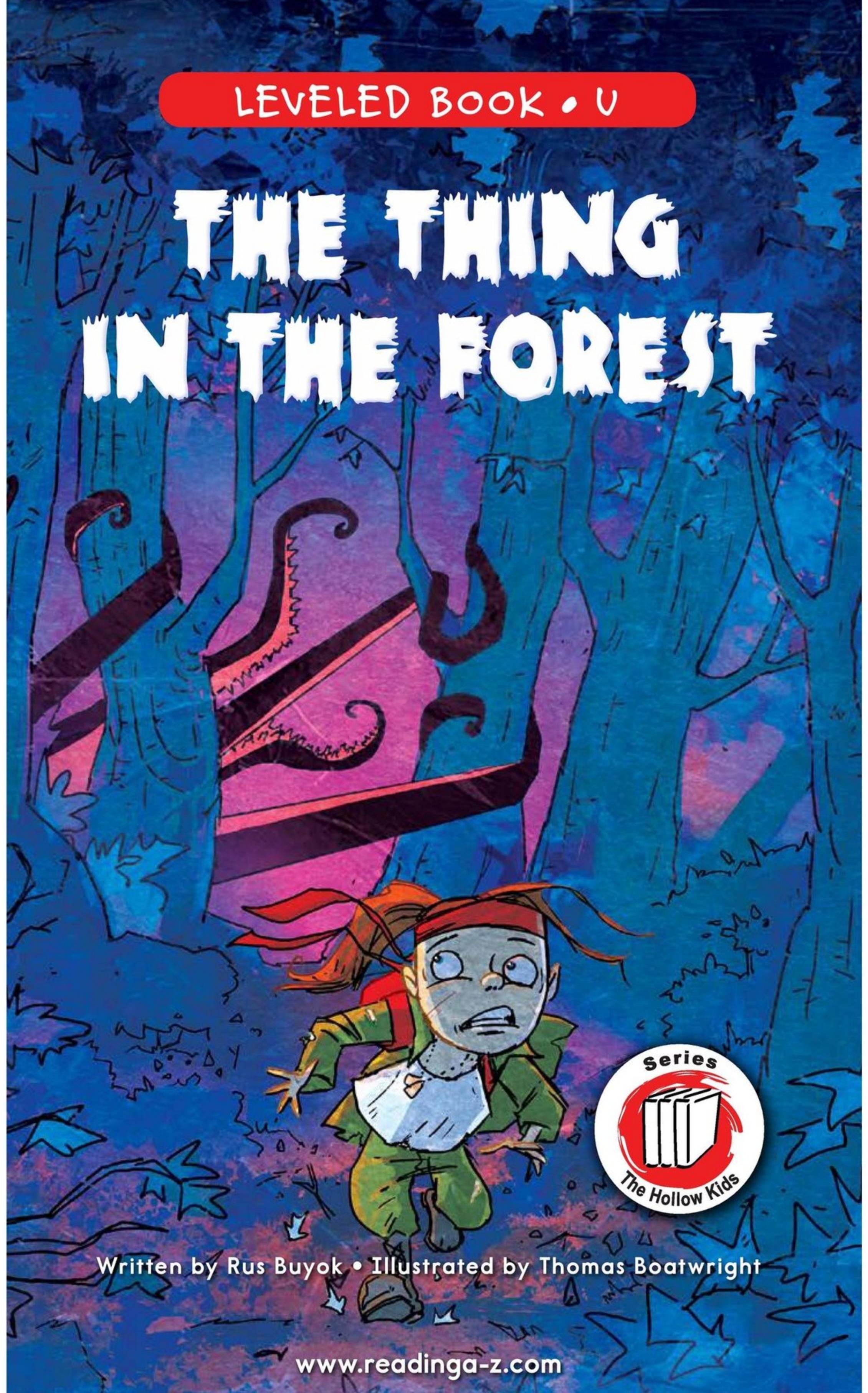


LEVELED BOOK • U

THE THING IN THE FOREST



Written by Rus Buyok • Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright



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Focus Question

How does the author's choice of words help us understand how the character is feeling in the story?

Words to Know

bulbous

flail

fortuitous

grasping

heaving

hulking

lurking

mammoth

momentum

utterly

vault

weave

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Level U Leveled Book
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Correlation

LEVEL U	
Fountas & Pinnell	Q
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



Everything is white, brighter than anything I've ever seen. For a moment it feels as if I'm weightless, floating on the other side of the strange, ornate door that the key opened. I can't see Sarah, but I can feel her hand **grasping** mine, squeezing so tightly it almost hurts.

Then, icy air begins to thunder in my ears, and I know we're falling—accelerating too fast for safety. I can barely catch my breath, and the wind stings my eyes. Sarah's grasp is stronger now, almost desperate, as the wind whips us around. A gust rips us in opposite directions, and in an instant, Sarah's hand is gone.

I begin to **flail**, blindly grasping for Sarah, but the air flips me, twists me, and I'm **utterly** lost. It takes my cries and flings them into the nothingness around.

Then, everything goes dark.



I open my eyes to see branches over my head. A bright, cold-looking moon hangs in the sky. Considering how fast I was falling, I'm just glad I'm not a splatter of goo on the ground.

Sitting up, I try to take stock of my situation. With the surrounding trees, chill air, and dead leaves crunching under my body, I could easily be back in the Hollow, but somehow I know I'm not. It's hard to put my finger on why, but the trees are a little too big, the moon is a little too full, and the leaves are a little too crisp.



Maybe it's me; I could have smacked my head on the way down—I do have a headache. I try to remember the events leading up to this moment. Sarah, Jake, Odie, and I had made our way through the Hollow with the strange boy, Thomas. We'd found Porter's Mill, and Thomas and his friends took us down into the Cave of the Lost, where we used a key to open the ornate door hidden behind the rock. Jake and Odie ran through first, and Sarah and I had to follow.

Where are they now? I listen, hoping to hear Sarah or Jake, or even Odie, rustling through the forest. I hear nothing—no birds, no wind, only silence.

"Sarah!" I call out. "Jake! Can anyone hear me?"

Something makes a noise to my right, a strange groaning sound. It could be Sarah or Jake, and they could be hurt. My legs feel shaky as I stand up and start walking toward it. The noise comes again, louder. Whatever is making it is hidden behind the fronds of a fern the size of a small elephant.

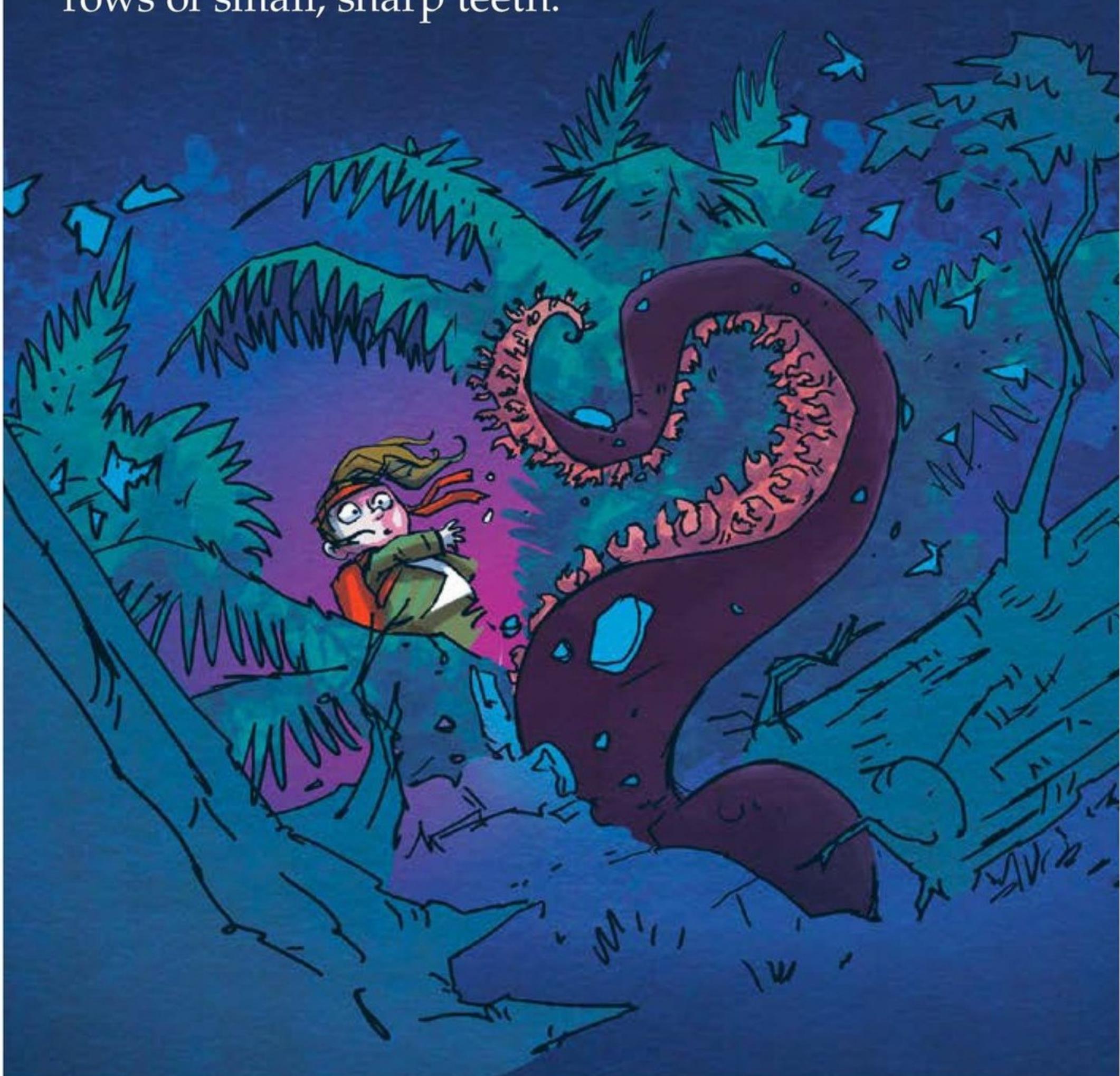




I gently push the leaves aside, hoping to see my best friend or little brother there just waking up, as I had. It's neither of them.

The sound comes again, and I can see the ground beyond the fern shifting, lifting, **heaving**, as if something large is trying to push itself up from underneath. The groaning is the sound of the trees surrounding the mound bending, being pushed up.

A loud crack shatters the silence as a huge root finally snaps and bursts out from the ground, showering me with clods of dark, wet soil. I watch, frozen by a mixture of fear and curiosity. The ground heaves again, and from the loose dirt exposed by the broken root, something begins to snake out. It's dark and wet, like a large worm. As more of it begins to slither from the earth, I realize it's not a worm—it's a tentacle, covered with menacing-looking suckers, each surrounded by rows of small, sharp teeth.



Fear finally overpowers curiosity, and I run—fast. Branches scratch my skin and pull at my clothes as I **weave** between the trees and through the underbrush. Whatever it is must have finally freed itself from the ground, as I can hear the thing crashing through the forest behind me. With a quick glance backward, I see more tentacles shooting out of the darkness and grasping trees as the creature pulls itself in chase. It sounds huge.



I scramble under a fallen tree and **vault** over a shrub. Then, in an attempt to lose the thing, I take a hard left, almost losing my footing in the soft ground. It doesn't work—the creature shifts direction faster than me.

It's right on my heels. My heart pounds in my chest, my lungs ache, and a sharp pain begins to form under my rib cage. I don't know how much longer I can sprint, but the horror of the thing behind me drives me forward.



Suddenly I can see the edge of the forest, like a massive black wall rushing toward me. Maybe the tentacled thing wouldn't be able to follow me without trees to pull it along—or maybe it would be faster on open ground. I don't have a choice; I have to risk it.

I try to pick up speed, though my legs feel as if they're on fire now. I'm almost to the edge of the trees, so I put my head down and push harder. In a **fortuitous** moment, I happen to see that the solid ground ends at the sharp edge of a steep cliff mere steps away.



I don't have time to turn, and I can't stop. I see another of the **mammoth** ferns out of the corner of my eye. I reach out for one of the huge fronds and make contact. My hand closes around the frond as my legs run out of ground.



The frond is strong, and the **momentum** of my running actually whips me around to the side. I peek down and see no ground, just a sea of clouds far below turned gray by the moonlight. I land hard and roll into a sapling as the creature swings itself out of the forest and realizes too late that it has nothing else to grasp.



In the moonlight, I finally see it: a dark, **hulking** creature resembling an octopus the size of a small car, with a **bulbous** head and more horrible-looking tentacles than I can count in the few moments it hangs in view. Wood creaks as the last tentacles try to hold onto the trees, but the creature's bulk is too great. Its tentacles flail, trying to grasp anything. One latches onto my pant leg. I wrap my arms around the sapling, hanging on with everything I have.

With loud cracking sounds, the trees the creature is holding give way. For a moment, I think it will take me over the cliff with it, but I feel the fabric of my pants tear in one sudden jerk.

The thing falls silently. I crawl to the edge of the cliff in time to see it disappear into a puff of clouds.



I lean back, sitting on my heels, trying to catch my ragged breath. My hands shake, and I feel as if I might cry. I'd never been so frightened in all my life.

Before me stretches a sea of gray clouds, disappearing into the darkness beyond. Behind me, the forest waits silently. More of those octopus creatures could be **lurking** beneath the ground, or perhaps worse things are waiting for me.

Two things become clear in this moment: I'm alone, and this isn't the Hollow.

Where am I—and where are Sarah and Jake?



Glossary

bulbous (<i>adj.</i>)	round, swollen, or enlarged, usually in an ugly way (p. 13)
flail (<i>v.</i>)	to wave one's limbs wildly about (p. 4)
fortuitous (<i>adj.</i>)	occurring by chance with a positive or lucky outcome (p. 11)
grasping (<i>v.</i>)	grabbing and holding onto firmly (p. 3)
heaving (<i>v.</i>)	lifting with effort; rising and falling in a rhythm (p. 7)
hulking (<i>adj.</i>)	huge or heavy (p. 13)
lurking (<i>v.</i>)	waiting or moving around in hiding (p. 15)
mammoth (<i>adj.</i>)	very large; enormous (p. 11)
momentum (<i>n.</i>)	the strength or force that keeps something moving or increasing over time (p. 12)
utterly (<i>adv.</i>)	absolutely, totally, or completely (p. 4)
vault (<i>v.</i>)	to energetically jump over something, usually using hands or a pole for help (p. 10)
weave (<i>v.</i>)	to move in a winding or side-to-side manner, usually to avoid obstacles (p. 9)

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A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,226

Connections

Writing

Rewrite the story from the creature's point of view. Include what the creature is thinking and how it feels.

Science

Where could the narrator be? Develop the setting for the story. Describe the climate, wildlife, plant life, and other factors that tell about where the story takes place.



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