

The  
Adventures  
of  
DOTTY  
LADYBUG

By Michael Sugarman and Kim Swain  
Illustrated by Kris Guerra



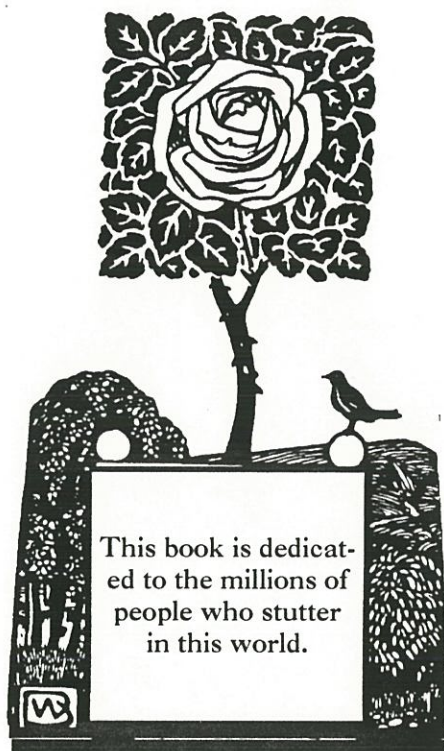
The  
Adventures  
of  
DOTTY  
LADYBUG

Written by  
Michael Sugarman and Kim Swain

Illustrated by  
Kris Guerra

© Copyright Michael Sugarman, 1993. All rights reserved.





This book is dedicat-  
ed to the millions of  
people who stutter  
in this world.





## Chapter One

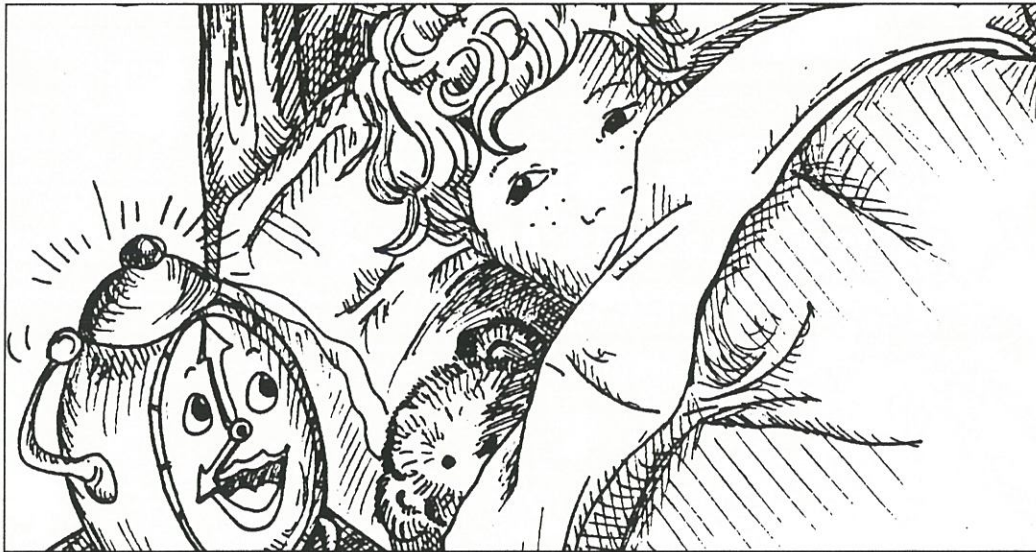


lick...Clock...Tick...Tock...Click...Ring...Ring!"

A bright cheery voice rang out from the alarm clock, "It's time to wake up!"

Phil rolled over, grunted and pulled the covers over his head. "Now Phil, you'll be late for school, it's 8:00 A.M.," the clock insisted.

Phil slowly rolled out of bed and dragged himself over to the mirror on the edge of his dresser. A sleepy face topped with curly, auburn locks in disarray stared back at him. He squinted, rubbed his eyes and spoke to the mirror, carefully watching his mouth move. "I-I-I can say words," Phil insisted with a stutter. Then he looked away and added painfully, "Why doesn't anyone l-l-like me?"



Phil was so preoccupied with himself that he almost failed to notice a tiny voice calling frantically from outside his bedroom window, "Help! Let me in... Hurry up! I won't last much longer unless you open up immediately!"

Phil rushed to the window tripping over a pair of carelessly discarded sneakers left next to the desk. He squinted out the window, but saw nothing.

"Down here!" cried an overgrown lady bug tapping heavily on the window and pointing desperately overhead. As Phil looked up he saw a large, dark shadow above. Frantic, Phil struggled to open the window. Pulling with all his might the stubborn window opened just a sliver, barely enough for the lady bug to slip under.





CRASH... a crack skated across the glass. A savage bird, bigger than Phil had ever seen before, smashed into the windowpane. Her powerful beak wedged firmly in the little space the lady bug had just scurried through. The bird's shadow engulfed the room. She tried to pry the window open, vigorously beating the glass with her wings.

Phil leaned up against the frame to keep it from opening anymore, "W-What now?" he stammered staring down at the bug.

The lady bug shrugged her antennae and muttered, "Please excuse me, sir," as she slipped under the lip of the pillow case on Phil's bed to hide. Phil desperately tried to push the window shut. "I-I-I can't hold on like this forever!" he cried.

The lady bug peeked out from under the covers. She spotted a small tray in the corner of Phil's room. On it sat the crust of a peanut butter sandwich and a shaker of salt and pepper, leftovers from Phil's late night snack. The lady bug pointed hoping up and down. As Phil scrambled to the table, his efforts seemed in vain.

The bird angrily forced her head into the room. With spiked claws she inched the window open further. It would not be long before she would swoop in and devour her prey.

Phil had to think fast. He grabbed the shaker and showered the creature's sharp beak with a stream of pepper. "Ah Ah Ah...Chooo," the bird's sneeze rattled the windows and shook the room. It propelled the ferocious bird backward and she disappeared over the treetops.

"Gesundheit," the lady bug replied as she emerged from the bed covers and buzzed up to the edge of the mirror.

Phil stared wide-eyed at the lady bug. "W-What was that?"





Busily brushing pepper grinds from her antennae, the lady bug replied in a distinctive English accent straight from the pages of a dusty old Victorian novel. "They call her Etah, ruler of the Forest of Discord."

A shiver of fear ran down Phil's spine. He had been warned never to go into the forest. "W-Why was she chasing you?" demanded Phil still quite shaken. What started off as a rather dull morning was turning out to be quite an adventure.

Phil now noticed the matching spotted carrying bag the lady bug kept at her side. "Let me try to explain young man," she said while digging into her bag. The spotted creature tossed out an old mattress spring, a blue argyle sock and a tube of toothpaste, absent the cap. Phil ducked.

"Ah, here it is!" she delighted. Phil drew in closer. The bug opened her hand and on her palm sat a long, slender box carved with exotic characters, the likes of which Phil had never seen before. The boldly printed instructions on the box read, "THIS SIDE UP ONLY."

The lady bug gently held the treasure up to the light and chuckled, "I haven't figured out how it works, but it must be very powerful. The old bird was quite upset when she found out that I had it."

Phil had so many questions about the bird and how the lady bug found the mysterious box. But before he had a chance to open his mouth, the lady bug added with a royal bow, "And to whom do I owe my life, kind sir?"

Phil shuffled his feet and mumbled softly, "M-M-My name is Ph-Phil. Who are you?"

"Why I'm Lady Dotty. I come from a long and distinguished line of Coccinellidae." Phil looked puzzled. "Bugs," she whispered, as if the word were beneath her.

Phil laughed nervously. This woke the alarm clock who was snoozing. "What? Are you still here?" he scolded.

"Uh, oh," Phil answered. He usually mumbled "Uh oh" when he was in trouble. Phil headed straight for the bedroom door. "I-I'm l-late for school, but I-I don't feel like going at all," he said turning back to Lady Dotty.

Lady Dotty buzzed up onto Phil's shoulder and pulled on his ear lobe. "How about if I meet you there? I have some matters to attend to first, but I could stop by as soon as I am finished." And she turned to leave.

"B-But you d-don't know where to go!"

Lady Dotty reached into her carrying bag. Now she was wearing a checkered cap and held a magnifying glass in her hand. Elementary, my dear Phil. I'll find you. Lady bugs have excellent detective skills." And she slipped back through the narrow opening under the window and flew off.

Phil slowly gathered up his books which were scattered across the top of his desk. When he reached for his half finished homework assignment he noticed the Lady Dotty had left her valuable box behind. "Y-You forgot this!" he called out after her in vain. But she was gone.

Phil reached for the box. "Ouch!" it bristled when he touched it. "How did it do that?" thought Phil to himself. Phil quickly grabbed the prickly box and shoved it into his shirt pocket, buttoning the pocket shut.



## Chapter Two



Phil snatched up the rest of his papers and sprinted out of the bedroom. "Don't forget your lunch!" Phil's father scolded as he saw Phil make his way toward the front door.

"Uh oh," Phil said to himself. He retrieved his lunch bag from the kitchen. "Th-Thanks, Dad!"

As Phil rounded the corner on his way to school he spotted his neighbor, Sam. "What bad timing," Phil thought to himself.

Sam made a hobby out of teasing Phil about his stuttering. Although Phil was actually taller, Sam could make Phil feel insignificant. So Phil, searching for a hide-out, ducked under a nearby bush. But it was too late. Sam spotted him.



"Gee whiz. I wonder where Phil could be," Sam said aloud as he pretended to search for Phil. "Perhaps he's lost again." Embarrassed, Phil crawled snail-like out of the bushes. He desperately looked up hoping to find Lady Dotty. Maybe she could rescue him.

"What are you looking for? A spaceship to make an escape?" Sam laughed at his own joke.



Unable to bear Sam's teasing any longer, Phil tried to muster up the courage to respond. Before he could, Phil felt a slight jolt in his pocket and remembered the baffling box. He retrieved it from its resting place. The cryptic words imprinted on the sides were aglow.



“Wow, a present for me,” marveled Sam as he snatched the treasure from Phil’s grasp. But the box did not cooperate and stung Sam’s hand hard, “Ouch! stop it,” Sam cried as he flung it down.

“D-Don’t br-break it!” But Sam didn’t hear for he was nursing his aching hand.

“How did you do that?” demanded Sam looking fearfully at Phil. Phil was about to apologize but realized that for the first time he had the upper hand.

Sam had stopped his teasing. “This box might turn out to be very helpful,” Phil thought to himself. Then he remembered his friend Lady Dotty and began to worry. “Would Lady Dotty show up? Was she safe?”

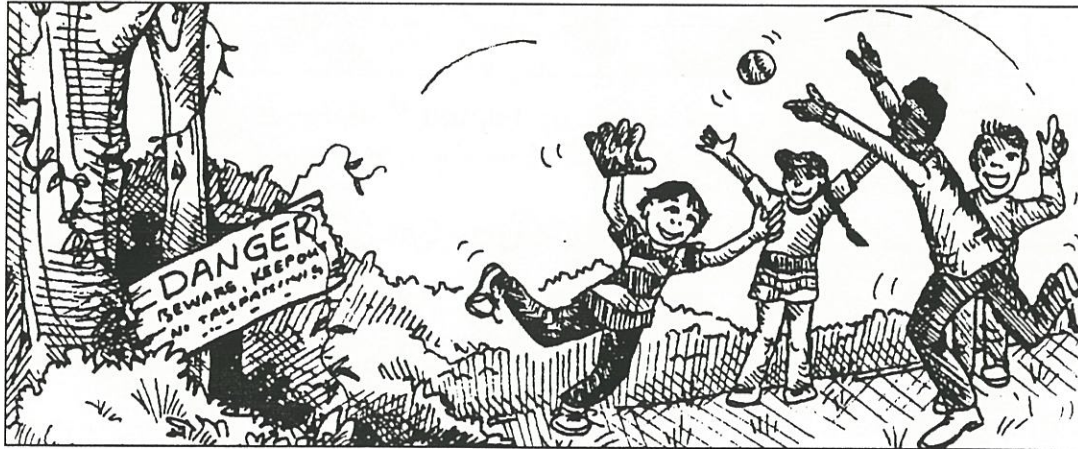
## Chapter Three



As Phil and Sam made their way to school, they approached a half dozen of their classmates playing catch against the Forest of Discord. The path which led into the forest was covered with bramble and thorny vines. On a stake driven deep into the ground a sign warned:

**DANGER, BEWARE, KEEPOUT, NO TRESPASSING**  
*If you can read this you're already too close!*

A cold shiver climbed from Sam's toes to his head. Terrified, he thought to himself, "Nobody goes in there. If anyone tried they'd never come back." Then a sneaky idea occurred to him, "I'll get back at Phil and scare him. I'll pretend that I want to go into that horrible place and ask Phil to come with me. When he refuses to go, I can tease him all day long in front of my friends for being a chicken, a sissy, a wimp and a weakling." Sam laughed out loud as he thought about how much fun he would have tricking Phil.



A frayed softball whizzed through the air straight at Sam. "Catch it!" yelled Erin.

Sam stretched high in the air to make an expert catch. "Out!" he cried victoriously.

"Don't throw it to Phil," teased Max in a high pitched voice. "He doesn't know how to play."

"H-H-He's a f-fumbler and a m-mumbler and would only drop it," mimicked Christopher.



At that moment Erika, who had snuck up behind Phil, reached over and tapped Phil's shoulder. "Cooties! Cooties!" she yelled as she ran toward the others.

"Don't touch him, you'll catch it!" warned Gina. She added, "My mother warned me to stay away from Phil."

"He's got a disease," yelled another, as the group ran off laughing and playing.

Alone, Phil felt terrible. He sadly lowered his head to his chest. "Now I remember why I don't like school."



"Don't let them get you down. I stood next to you and didn't catch anything."

Phil swung around, not recognizing the voice. He nervously glanced at the girl standing next to him. She had long, ebony hair and curious deep eyes. Phil stared at her.

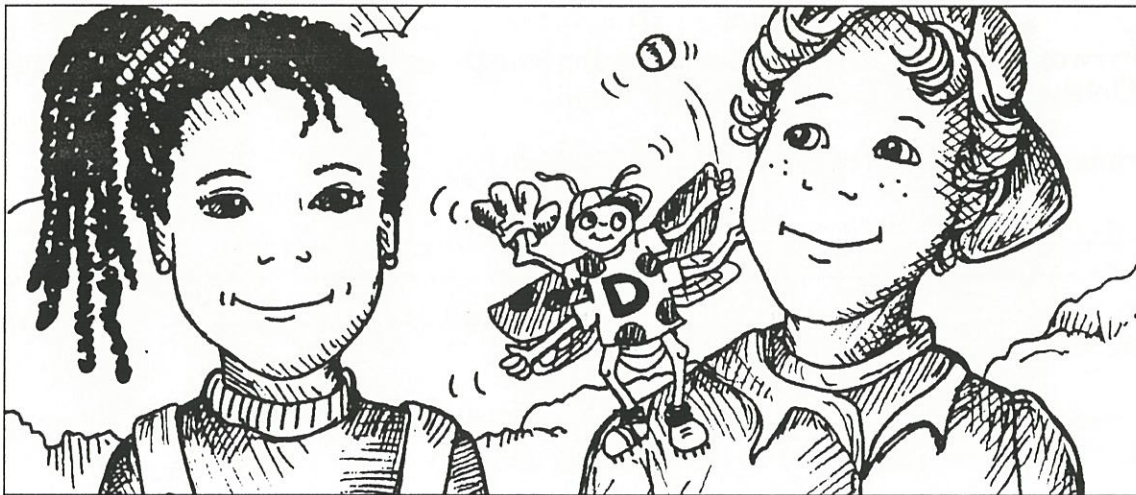
"Hi, I just moved here. My name is Rebecca. What's yours?"

Phil froze. "What am I going to do?" he thought. "I don't want to stutter. I don't know why it is but I have the hardest time of all when I try to say my name. I just won't say anything." Phil just stood there.

Rebecca gave Phil a friendly smile and urged, "What's the matter? Tongue tied?"

"Uh oh," thought Phil. "I'm in real trouble. I don't know what to say."

Smack! Dotty suddenly dropped right onto Phil's shoulder. She was wearing a baseball cap and cleats. Her English accent had disappeared and she now spoke in a gruff baseball manager's voice. "Need some coaching?" she asked slapping her hand in her mit.





"L-Lady Dotty! I-I was so afraid something happened." Phil realized he had just spoken and wasn't so worried about his speech.

"Call me just plain Dotty," the bug insisted.

"Hello, Dotty," answered Rebecca, delighted by the lady bug. She stared back at Phil, "You have a charming friend, but who are you?"

"Ph-Ph-Ph-Phil!" It was the worst stuttering Phil ever remembered when saying his name. He closed his eyes tightly, expecting Rebecca to burst into laughter.

Instead, Rebecca simply asked, "Do you stutter?"

Phil's eyes opened wide and he stared at Dotty. "Don't look at me," she responded.

"D-Did you notice?" answered Phil, "I try to h-hide it, but..."

"Have you ever tried not to hide it?" asked Rebecca.

"N-No. I-I try not to say anything because as soon as I do, nobody l-listens," Phil replied.

"How would I know if you have anything worth saying if you don't even try?" smiled Dotty tapping his forehead with a thump.

"Th-that's easy for you to s-say," pouted Phil.

Lady Dotty giggled, "It sounded as if it was easy for you to say too."

"I just want to be friends," added Rebecca. "I don't care if you stutter." She gave Phil a big warm smile which made him feel good.

Sam spotted Phil over by the roadside talking to Rebecca. "Now's the time," he thought. "I can embarrass Phil in front of everybody."

"Hey, Phil, come over here. The Forest of Discord is this way. Let's go!"

The ball game came to a sudden standstill. All the classmates were silent, waiting for an answer. Phil had to start over three or four times before he was able to say, "I-I d-don't think so."

"You can't go in there," quivered Erika.

"Nobody can see in there. It's so dark," shrieked Christopher.

"But they can see you," added another nervously.

Sam was pleased with himself. He had everyone's complete attention. "I know a place where nobody will make fun of your stuttering."

Phil's eyes widened, "W-Where's that?"

"In there. Follow me," Sam added in a spooky voice taking a giant step toward the forbidden path, pretending to want to go.

"In th-there?" repeated Phil, his knees shaking.

"I've been there. Many times," Sam lied.

The thought of finding a place where everyone would listen to him was too promising. Phil was interested. "T-Tell m-me about the magic place," he begged.

"There's a town called, uh..." Sam tried to think up a good lie to fool Phil, "uh, Friendshipville! Everyone there will be your friend." Sam spoke confidently as if it was really true.

"R-Really, a t-town where everyone would like me?"

"You want to go, don't you?" Sam tempted.

“Should you believe him?” interrupted Rebecca.

Sam was annoyed. He wasn’t going to let Phil ignore his challenge. “You’re so afraid your face is covered with goosebumps. Doesn’t he look spooked?” Sam asked his friends.

“Look his hair is standing straight up,” laughed Christopher.

“He’s shaking all over,” added Erika.

“He probably can’t talk at all now,” teased another.

Phil stood up as tall as he could to try to gather courage. “I-I might talk this way, but it doesn’t m-mean I’m afraid.” With a sudden burst Phil took a step toward the darkness, “L-Let’s start!”





Sam was stunned. He never believed that Phil would agree to go into such a monstrous place. He thought to himself, "I'm getting into a terrible mess. How am I going to get out of it?" Fearfully, he looked toward the gnarl of trees which marked the entrance to the Forest of Discord. It was all he could do to keep his friends from knowing how terrified he was.

"I'm going too," added Dotty. Quickly she tucked her carrying bag tightly under her wing.

"I can't let you go without me," echoed Rebecca.

The rest of Phil and Sam's classmates shook their heads in disbelief.

"Watch out!" warned Max.

"Oh my goodness, be careful," insisted Christopher.

"We'll meet you at the playground after school, that is if you ever make it," added Erika.

Before Sam had a chance to think of a way out, Gina sighed, "I can't believe you're actually going, Sam you're so brave." The rest of the crowd nodded in solemn agreement.

Sam was stuck, trapped. He knew he would have to go now. He trembled all over and was afraid to speak, so he didn't say a word.



## Chapter Four



Weathered barbed wire, red with rust, blocked the path to the Forest of Discord. As the adventurers crawled under, muddy ground squished beneath them. Above, thorn covered branches conspired to shut out the sunlight, and the wind moaned in the darkness.

Sam took the lead, the others followed close behind. Dark and unfamiliar sounds added to feelings of anxiety and despair that permeated the forest like a spell. Phil's stomach ached, his heart felt like a knot under his shirt where the mystical box rested. A powerful feeling was pulling him deep into the forest.

Cautiously, Lady Dotty perched herself on Phil's shoulder. "Do you have my treasure?" she whispered. Phil simply nodded and glanced at his pocket.



"Splendid," Dotty added. She was transformed into a 17th century explorer sporting knicker pants and equipped with a compass. The compass dial was spinning wildly, pointing first in one direction, then another.

"Do you know where we are going?" she called out to Sam.

"This is a short cut," Sam bluffed. "But, if you would rather lead, go right ahead." Phil and Rebecca exchanged nervous glances.

"I'll watch the flank, matey," Dotty responded with a salute as she tossed her useless compass to the ground.

"Ouch!" Sam cried, snared by a gnarled root poking up from the path. Rebecca and Phil rushed over to see if he was hurt. Together they tried to untangle Sam's foot, but the mischievous root held on tight.

"Will you look at this!" Rebecca exclaimed, examining the root carefully. Strange symmetrical marks ran down one side and up the other.

Sam tried to pull his foot from the clutches of the root, "It won't budge!"

"It looks like termite holes to me," Dotty stated as she flew over to take a closer look with her telescope. "Hmmm," she muttered, "not good."

Phil interrupted, "It l-l-looks like t-teeth marks."

"But what type of creature would make marks so big?" Rebecca remarked.

"Get me out of here!" Sam struggled. Phil tugged desperately at the root, it slackened just enough, so that Sam could wiggle free.

"I'm not sure I can walk," winced Sam as he tried to stand up.

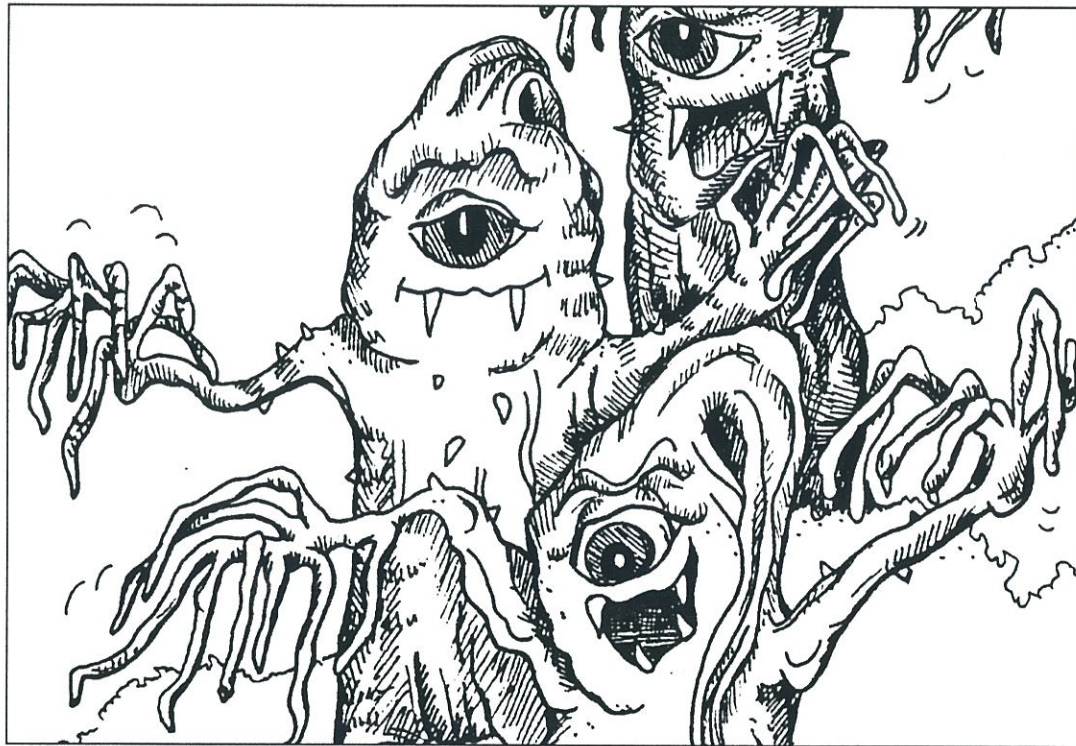


"W-We could help?" Phil hesitated remembering to whom he was talking.

Sam shifted his weight onto the injured foot. "Ouch!" he yelled. He looked at Phil and Rebecca who were offering him a hand. "Thanks, I think I may need it." He leaned heavily against his companions.

An eerie patch of light peeked through the dense shadows. "Listen," Phil warned. Grinding, mowing and chomping sounds rose up from the earth. Tree tops cracked and branches fell from above. The air grew dark with dust.

Sam, Phil, Dotty and Rebecca coughed and choked so hard that they could not move. As the dust settled, they discovered they were surrounded by slimy green beasties. Dozens of them, with gleaming fangs, twelve fingered hands,





thorny bodies and one protruding eyeball fixed in the center of their heads. From a tree branch above, Etah's voice echoed throughout the forest, "GET ME THAT BUG!

"Stop!" cried Phil when a green beastie lunged for Dotty bending one of her wings. Rebecca quickly picked up a rock and hurled it, smacking the beastie in the back of his head.

Another beastie grabbed Phil's arm slashing his pocket with its razor sharp fangs. Phil felt the box slide out as it escaped onto the forest ground.

Etah with her keen eyesight, spotted the treasure immediately. She was overcome with delight. "At last!" she screamed, "You have returned to me, your master. GRAB THAT BOX!"

One beastie after another tried to capture the box. But no matter how hard they tried it bounced about playfully escaping each attempt. As Phil lunged for the box, a beastie bit his hand, "Ouch!" he screamed as he clutched the box tight. Sam scooped up some dirt and flung it into the beastie's eye. It reeled in pain, letting go of Phil's hand.

"This way!" shouted Dotty waving madly. Her wing was so badly hurt that she could hardly fly. Desperately, the foursome dove into a cave, followed by two beasties clawing at their heels. Without warning the ground fell out from under them. Rebecca, Phil, Sam and Dotty plunged down into a deep pit.

The beasties dared not follow. They ringed the opening of the hole peering down after the hurtling bodies. High above them Etah cried, "You fools they've escaped!"

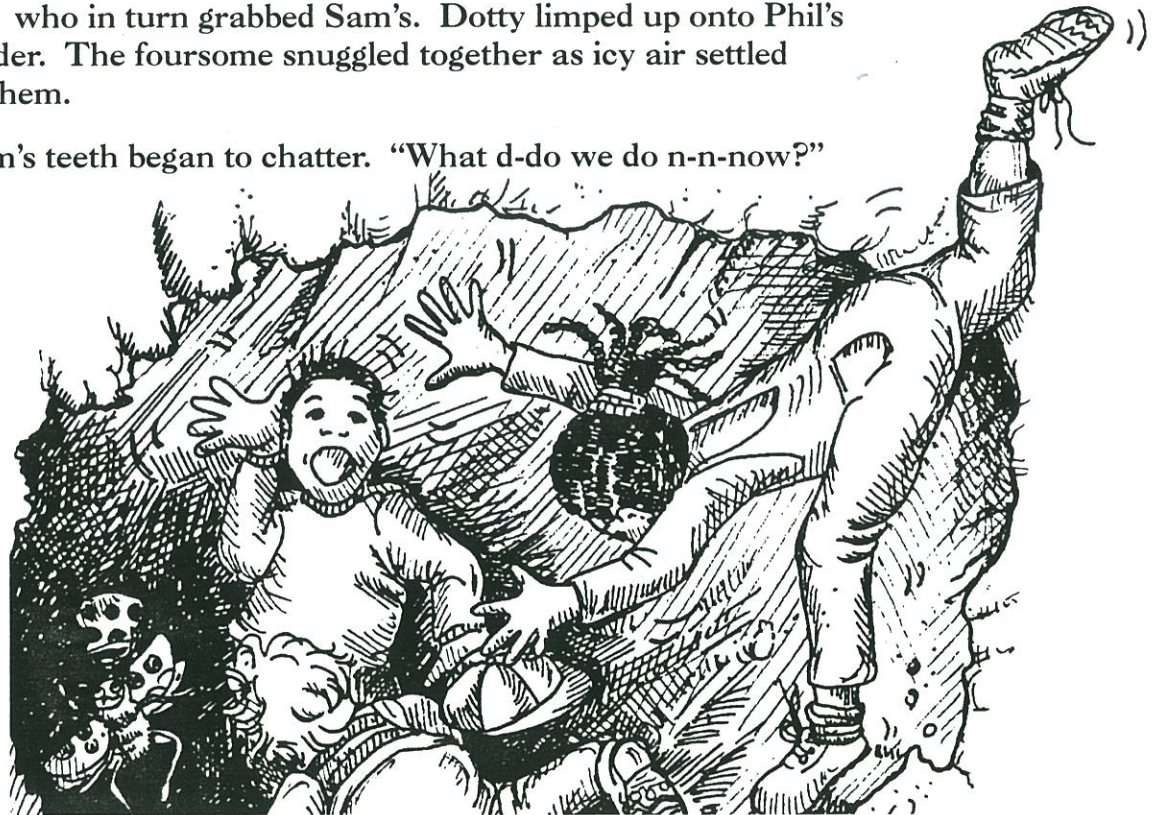
## Chapter Five



hil, Sam, Rebecca and Dotty landed in a heap on a narrow rock ledge protruding from the cave wall. Darkness coiled around them. Phil reached out and grabbed hold of a rock. The stone wiggled loose and tumbled into the dark. Moments later a tiny splash echoed up from the deep expanse below.

“Don’t anyone move,” warned Rebecca, clenching Phil’s hand, who in turn grabbed Sam’s. Dotty limped up onto Phil’s shoulder. The foursome snuggled together as icy air settled over them.

Sam’s teeth began to chatter. “What d-do we do n-n-now?”





"I thought you knew everything." Rebecca snapped back.

The reverberation of their voices caused a small avalanche of rocks which barely missed them.

"L-Let's whisper," suggested Phil.

Dotty slipped off Phil's shoulder and tiptoed into the blackness. She returned wearing a tiny miner's hardhat equipped with a headlight. "There's only one way to go. Follow me."



The light on Dotty's hat shone only a few feet ahead of them, enough to see how narrow the ledge was. Still holding hands, the adventurers inched forward leaning against the rock wall for support. They had to be very careful because the shadows played with the light making the ledge disappear and reappear with each step.

"I-I'm not sure I'll m-make it," worried Phil.

"You've got to try. We can't go back now," Rebecca urged.

As they rounded a corner, Dotty stopped short throwing the trio off balance. "There's something ahead, look!" She turned off her headlight.





A distant glow illuminated the cavern. It seemed to be moving toward them. The light spread across the rocky walls, silently creeping toward them. Suspended above were needle pointed rocks bejeweled with purple and red crystals. A veil of slippery green moss dripped from the edges of the ledge.

From around the bend, a booming voice resounded in the chamber.

“Intruders! Go back! You are not welcome!” A long rubbery creature radiating a deep orange glow approached them. He didn’t walk, rather, he slithered along like an advancing accordion. By now brightness filled the cavern making it as light as day. The adventurers stood awstruck.

“I am talking to YOU!” the voice demanded.

Rebecca said quietly, shaking, “We didn’t mean to disturb you. In fact, we didn’t intend to come here at all.”

Sam added sheepishly, “We’d be happy to leave, just show us the way out, Mr. uh..., I didn’t catch your name?”

“*Harumph!* Getting out won’t be easy,” bellowed the creature. “However, I do apologize for failing to introduce myself. Glorious Worm, ‘Glo’ for short.”

“P-P-Pleased to m-meet you,” interrupted Phil.

Glo nodded, “You are the first visitors I have had in, oh,” he paused to think to himself and added, “decades.”

“H-How l-l-lonely for you,” Phil sympathized. “D-Don’t you have any friends.”

“Visitors used to drop in on a regular basis, *harumph*. I used to have lots of company. That was the only way I could keep up with the news from above. But gradually they stopped coming.” He blinked his eyes heavily and sighed changing the subject. “I do make the best purple stalactite jam around,” he added proudly puffing out his ribbed chest. “Would you like to try some?”



"Sure," they answered in unison. Everyone was quite hungry having not eaten since breakfast.

Glo led the group around the corner to his cozy den. The walls were lined with soft, tightly woven moss. Glo's body radiated heat which warmed the room quickly and the air became thick and moist. The special jam rested on a small table in an alcove. Glo pulled down four spoons from the cupboard and passed them out to his company. The guests sat on three mismatched wooden chairs. Dotty found a resting place on Phil's shoulder.

"You look very dignified!" Rebecca observed noticing that Dotty was wearing a wee tux over a crisp starched shirt accented with a polka dotted tie.

"Tell us the rest of your story, Glo, what happened?" pleaded Sam. "Why did the visitors stop coming?" He scooped up a spoonful of jam and popped the whole thing in his mouth at once.

"Well," Glo continued, "I'm not exactly sure what happened. Someone told me things had gotten bad above. It was hard to travel. There were curfews and tolls. In a forest mind you. How absurd!" Glo shook his head in disgust. "Things weren't the same. All everyone talked about was Etah, a tyrant who took over as ruler of the forest."

"Yes, it has gotten very bad indeed," Dotty added. "Etah's servants, the beasties, devoured most of the forest. I'm not even sure if my home is still standing," she choked.

"W-W-We've got to do something!" Phil insisted. "I-I wonder if Friendshipville is still there?"

"It has to be," hoped Rebecca. "We've come so far already."

"We need to get out of here first," Sam noted.



Within moments the forgotten box began to stir in Phil's shirt. The room dimmed.

"What's happening?" Glo gasped as his light slowly drained from his body.

"It's getting cold in here!" exclaimed Sam.

"I-Its the box," Phil guessed. "L-Look!" As he spoke the glow from the box became so intense that they had to look away.

"Get rid of that thing," shrieked Rebecca. She grabbed the box from Phil's shirt pocket and threw it. It tetered on the edge of the cavern but would not fall off.

Suddenly, the light drained back out of the box and returned to Glo.

"Kick it off the ledge," shouted Sam.

Phil felt the box tugging at him, urging him to pick it up. He resisted at first, but then obeyed.

"Throw it over the edge," pleaded Sam.

By now Phil could not destroy the box. He protected it by putting it back into his shirt pocket.

"It's dangerous! Get rid of it!" Glo insisted.

"I-It's O.K. now," Phil reassured Glo. However, inside himself, Phil was not sure why he had rescued the box.

"Where did it come from?" Glo demanded.

Dotty answered "I found it one day unguarded in Etah's nest. The two beasties assigned to stand watch had gorged themselves on tree limbs and fell asleep. So, I grabbed it. I thought it might help. Etah's been chasing me for three days."

"Now what do we do?" asked Rebecca.

"How do we get out of here?" pleaded Sam.

Glo cocked his head and scratched his back with the tip of his curlicue tail.

"There must be a way," Rebecca added.

Dotty spoke, "I've been thinking, what about that stream?" Dotty pointed across the cavern.

"Yes," Glo remembered, "The Esteemed River. It used to lead out of here, but I'm not sure anymore."

Dotty started down the steep cavern slope. Rebecca and Sam followed. Glo did not move. Phil turned to Glo, "Wait everybody. Glo, come with us, we're going to F-Friendshipville."

Glo shook his head. "Where is this place?"

"I-Its where true f-friendship exists," added Phil.

"THERE IS NO SUCH PLACE" a voice boomed out from Phil's pocket. "DON'T BE A FOOL." The box let out a long low laugh which made Phil cringe. "ASK HIM, ASK SAM" the box continued.

The box's low voice grew ferocious, "TELL THE TRUTH."

Phil turned to confront Sam. "It was only a joke," Sam started. "I wanted to scare you in front of my friends and pretend that I was brave enough to enter the Forest of Discord. But, you were the brave one."

"How could you?" Rebecca demanded.

Sam whispered, "If I didn't go everyone would laugh at me."

"I wouldn't laugh," Dotty sympathized.

Sam started to cry. "My father always told me there is no place for cowards. He won't let me ever say I'm afraid, but I am sometimes."

"W-We all get afraid. I'm af-fraid people will tease me beacuse I s-stutter."

Rebecca added, "When we moved I was afraid that I wouldn't make any friends."

"I'm sorry." Sam admitted. "Now, we're all in trouble. I don't know where we are!"

"We must go on," urged Dotty. "We have no choice. Follow me."

The path veered sharply upward. Each step was treacherous, the ledge narrow and slippery. A sour stench reached up from the curdling stream below. One mistake, one false step, and the adventurers could be gone forever.

"It's f-f-f-freezing cold," whispered Phil from the back of the group. His voice was muffled by the thick mist surrounding them.

"I'm so tired and cold," sighed Sam as he grimaced in pain. His ankle still ached.

"We've got to keep moving," encourage Rebecca.

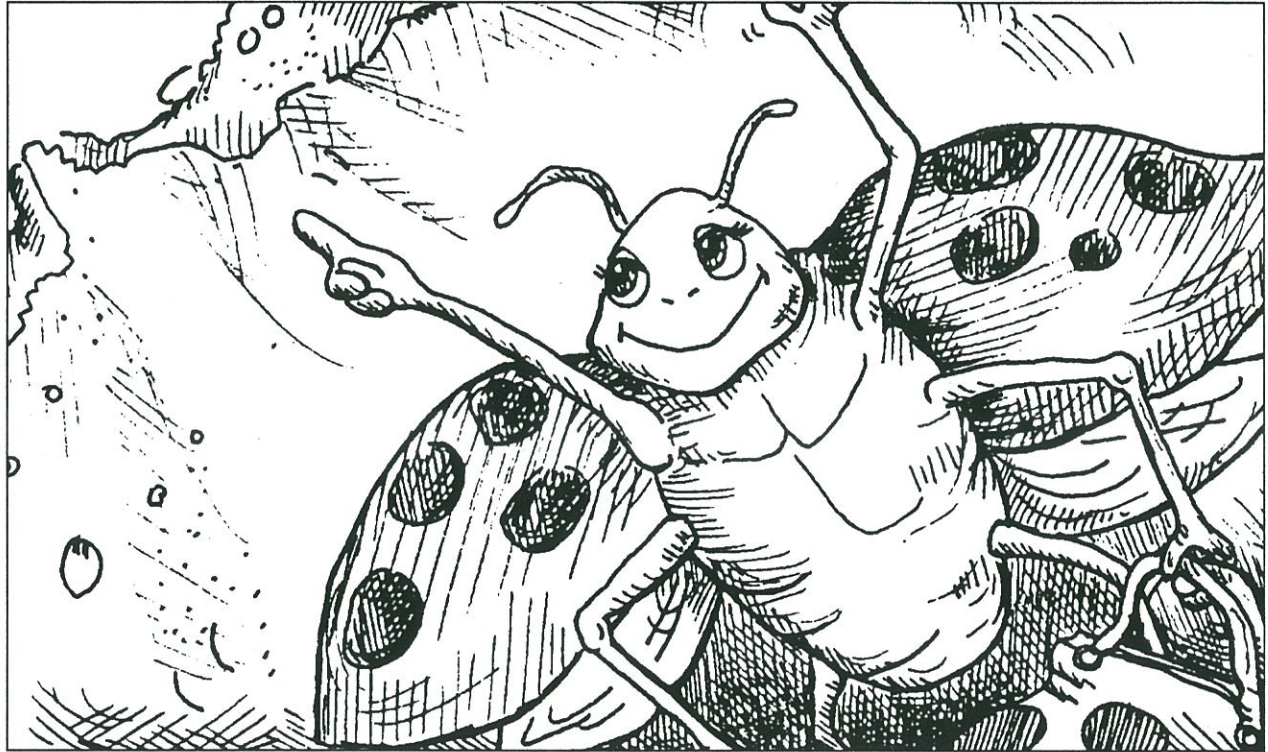
The adventurers arrived at a twist in the trail which turned upward and embraced a sliver of sunlight from somewhere above. "We've found the way out! I'll go ahead and scout," announced Dotty as she flew out the opening.

"L-Let's go!" Phil started up the steep incline toward the opening as the others followed close behind.



“You’re welcome to visit again anytime.” As Glo’s tail waved it left streaks of light with each good-bye swish.

The children answered, “Thank you,” in unison and waved good-bye in return.

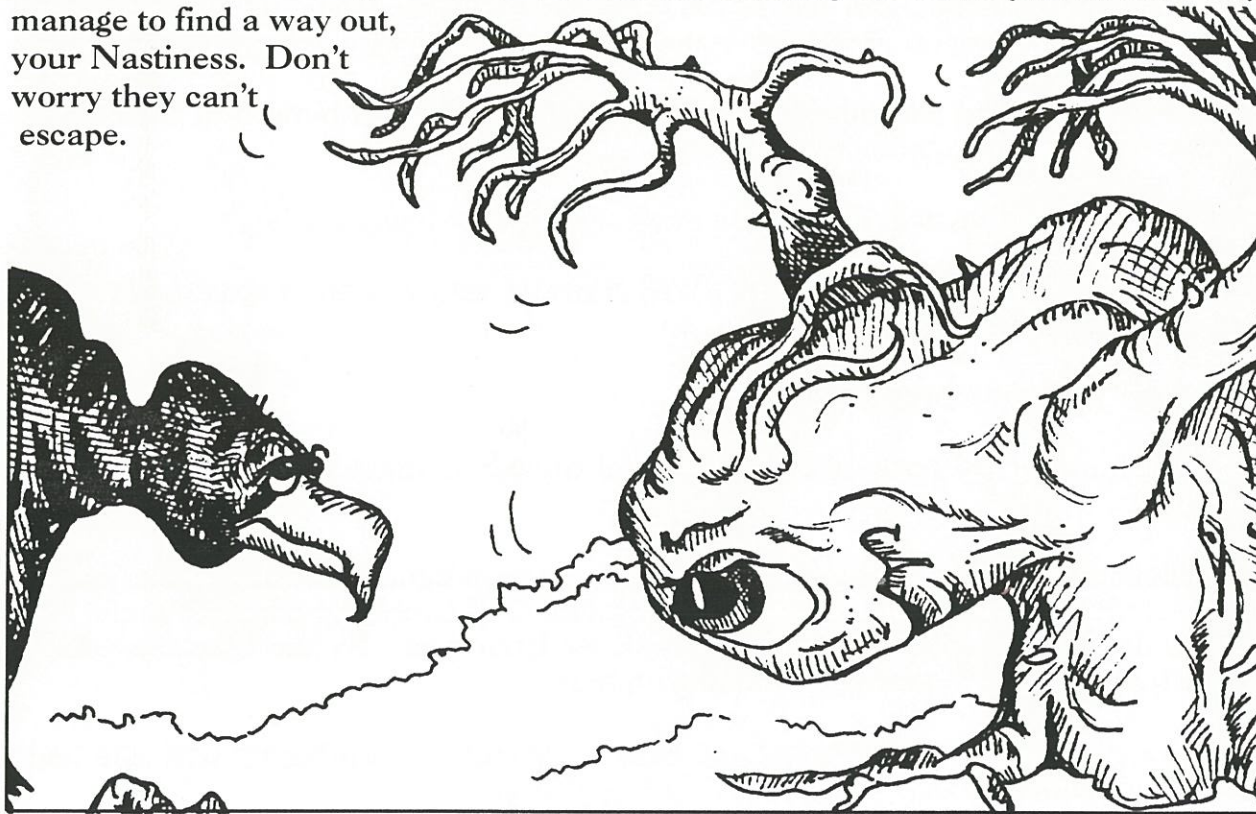


## Chapter Six



eanwhile, deep in the Forest of Discord, high in her fortress of dead leaves and thorns, Etah fumed. "How could you have let them escape?"

The captain of the beasties was accustomed to soothing Etah when she was angry. "I've posted guards to watch the cavern day and night. Three patrols are combing the forest just in case they manage to find a way out, your Nastiness. Don't worry they can't escape.



"You've never failed me before, Wollof. But there's always a first time." The bird added with a huff, "and you know that my punishment can be severe, even final."

Captian Wollof almost swallowed his tongue. He remembered what happened to the last captain who had failed to follow orders.

"Get the scouts together. I want a progress report, NOW!" Etah demanded.

As the alarm sounded, beasties hurried to attention. It was natural for beasties to slouch. They tried in vain to stand straight, but their bodies just would not stay upright.

"What a motley bunch you are," Etah cried surveying her servants. "No wonder you can't do a thing right. Just look at you. Inefficient, slothful and ugly too."

Etah eyed a young beastie who was trying hard to conceal himself at the end of the line. "You, step up here, immediately."

"Tell me what is wrong with you, go on, hurry up. I haven't all day."

The young creature spoke softly, "Well, I'm not very clever. I was never very good with numbers."

"Go on," Etah encouraged.

"I'm clumsy. My teeth are crooked and my fur is matted," the youth added quickly.

Wollof watched carefully. He remembered, years ago, when this same young beastie climbed his first tree and was full of pride. But Etah knew how to make the beasties doubt themselves. He saw how clever Etah was. By the time the young beastie had finished, Wollof's eyes filled with tears.

"Enough of your dribble," snapped Etah suddenly remembering why she had summoned them together. "Where is that Lady Bug?"

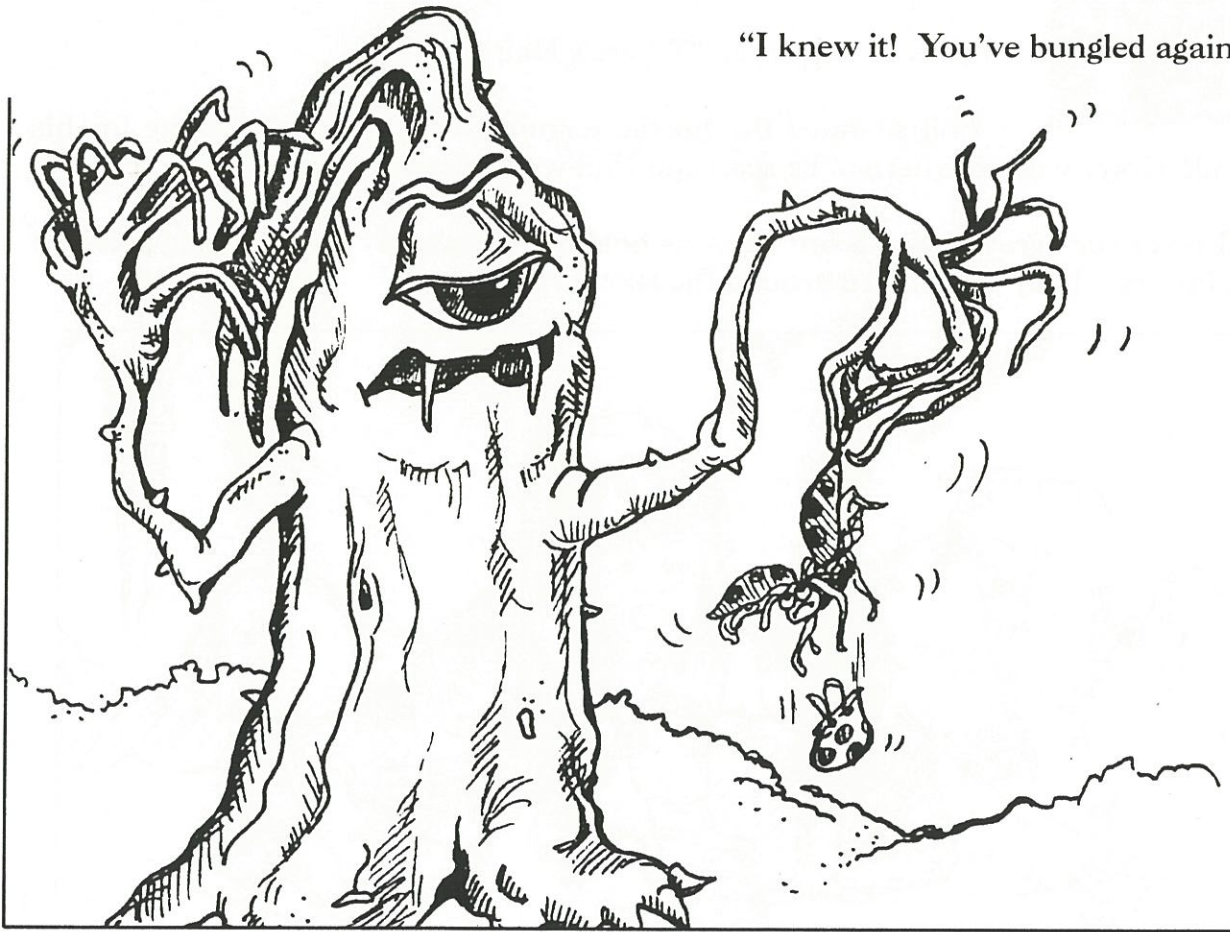


Before any excuses could begin, one of the patrols burst into the rear of the assembly room, "We've got her!" they cried, holding Dotty up by her tattered wings.

Etah could barely control her joy, but quickly remembered that everyone was watching. "Hand her over, and the box too. NOW!"

The leader of the patrol stepped forward gingerly. "There is no box, your Nastiness. We looked everywhere."

"I knew it! You've bungled again."



## Chapter Seven



hil, Rebecca and Sam emerged from the cavern exhausted. Only a few jagged rocks traversed the otherwise barren horizon. The blustery wind breathed down upon them.

Rebecca shivered. "Where's Dotty?"

Phil scanned the hostile terrain before them searching for his friend. Dotty was no where to be seen and Phil was worried.

"Look over here!" called Sam. He was holding Dotty's tiny carrying bag between two fingers. They all huddled around the spotted bag.



"Beasties were here, too," Rebecca observed. The gritty sand revealed the beasties unmistakable prints.

"W-We've got to go after her," cried Phil.

"Before we go anywhere we'll need a plan," Rebecca interjected.

"E-Etah will n-n-never let Dotty go," Phil sighed as he paced restlessly. He touched the box which was tucked away in his pocket. "I-I know! We'll trade Dotty for the box."

"What if Etah captures us instead?" Sam reminded Phil.

"That box has strong powers. Maybe there's another way," Rebecca said.

Phil pulled the box out of his pocket. Sam and Rebecca each took a big step backwards. Phil surveyed the treasure carefully, looking for a clue. He placed the box firmly on the ground prominently displaying "THIS SIDE UP ONLY."

"I wonder why it says that?" asked Sam taking a step forward to inspect the words.

"It has a lid, open it!" Rebecca suggested.

Phil gingerly reached down and tried to open the lid. It wouldn't budge.

"Let me try," Sam insisted as he wiped his hands off on his jeans to get a better grip. Sam pulled and poked, but the box held tight like an oyster guarding its pearl.

"Maybe there's a secret combination? Try pushing both sides at the same time, like this," Rebecca demonstrated. And sure enough the lid slowly opened. The children scrambled to hide.

"FLESRU OYNI EVE ILEB," the box rumbled and then was silent.



"What could it mean?" asked Sam.

"I-It m-m-must be s-some kind of code," responded Phil.

"Perhaps if we say it faster or write it down we can figure it out." Rebecca suggested.

"That's a good idea," started Sam, but before he had a chance to finish his sentence a laugh rang out from the treetops above, startling them.

"You're surrounded," called down Etah. "Not too clever are you?"

The beasties appeared from behind the trees. From Wollof's claws dangled a small cage which held Lady Dotty captive.

"D-Dotty! Are you alright?" Phil asked.

Dotty did not respond. She seemed to be in a trance and did not hear him.

"What have you done to her?" demanded Sam.

"She looks hurt," added Rebecca.

"Such a caring bunch, I'm touched," mocked Etah. "Now let's get down to business. Who has my box?" She leered at the adventurers. Etah fanned her claws slowly, turning her attention to Phil. "I'm speaking to you. What a pitiful sight you are."

Phil began to tremble, "Wh-What d-do you mean?"

Etah smirked. "A stutterer. Nobody will ever listen to you. Even your so called friends think you're an embarrassment!"

"That's not true," Sam cried out.

Etah turned her attention to Sam. She flew down from her perch and hovered over him. "We'll just see how long you'll stick up for your friend. I'll let you go, alone, if you tell me who has the box." Sam was silent. He tried, but he could not help but glance at Phil.

"Uh! My question is answered!"

"I didn't say anything." Sam called out.

"It's no use, Phil, you've been betrayed." Etah cackled. She spotted the box which sat quietly at his feet.



"Hand it to me!" Etah insisted anxiously.

Phil reached down and opened the box, "FLESRU OYN EVE ILEB".

"I kn-know the s-secret," bluffed Phil.

For the first time Etah was visibly shaken. "That is not possible." she announced sizing up her opponent.

"You're a fool. Did you think you could trick me?" Etah laughed. "Grab them!"

This time the adventurers could not escape, there was no where to run. They were hopelessly out numbered.



## Chapter Eight



t's so darkdown here. I can't see a thing."

"D-Dotty, are you O.K.?"

"Here's your bag. We found it on the ground." Sam held the tiny bag out into the darkness in the direction of the voices.

Within seconds, the dungeon was lit. Dotty was still in her tiny cage wearing the black and white striped uniform of a prisoner and holding a single candle balanced in a shining ceramic holder.

"What a depressing outfit," Rebecca responded.

Phil stared at Lady Dotty and said, "W-What was wrong with you up there? What did Etah do to you?"





"I'm not really sure." Dotty shook her head. "One minute I was O.K. and the next minute I was under her spell."

"W-W-We've got to get out of here before it happens again."

"It looks hopeless," Rebecca remarked as she surveyed the slick wall which encircled them. The pale light from above was occasionally blocked by the beastie who was standing guard.

Sam said, "Phil, I think you had her worried when you said you knew the secret. Let's try to figure it out. It's our only chance."

Rebecca carefully etched the magic words into the dirt as Dotty held the candle up high above their heads.



"FLESRU OYN EVE ILEB," Rebecca repeated as she wrote the words with her index finger. "Doesn't make any sense."

"Pull them up!" ordered Etah from above the dungeon, interrupting the conversation. A single thread of rope dropped down from the opening beckoning them to climb.

Up above, in the center of the arena, sat a small crude platform. Beasties were busy decorating it with braches of poison oak and thistles. Benches unevenly

carved from rotten logs, surrounded the stage. Some of the beasties had already selected their seats and were anxiously waiting for the ceremony to begin.

"Enough, enough. It's time," signaled Etah to her chief aide.

Wollof barked out a long call and motioned for everyone to gather around. They did so immediately.

The prisoners were placed on the platform. Dotty's cage swung from a nail. Ragged and tired they appeared to be no match for Etah. She relished this moment. Her box was safely tucked away. All night she had thought about how to orchestrate this event.

Etah picked on Phil because she thought he would be easy to humiliate. "You tried to out smart me." She cooed. "Look at you now. Go ahead, admit that you have been whipped. You are a b-b-b-bumbler and a fool. You can't even say your own name, Ph-Ph-Phil." She cackled watching her words take effect.

Phil felt a lump in his throat. He looked at Rebecca and Sam. Although they said nothing, he felt a little better.

"Look at me," Etah demanded, feeling she was losing momentum. "You can't even stand up for yourself."

Phil remembered the conversation he had in the cell with his friends. "We must figure out the secret." Blocking out Etah's badgering, Phil concentrated on repeating the mysterious phrase over and over in his mind.

"Listen to me." Etah coaxed. "You have no choice but to do as I say."

Phil could feel his will weakening and his mind slipping into a trance. Phil shook his head. Etah demanded obedience. Phil thought about the instructions on the box "THIS SIDE UP ONLY." What if he didn't do as he was told. What if Etah had everything backwards. And then it occurred to him. The message, it was backwards too.

Phil felt the courage to speak up. "B-Believe in yourself!" That's it! FLESRU OYN EVE ILEB is b-believe in yourself, backwards!" yelled Phil.

"You know nothing," Etah screeched trying to maintain control.

"You're wrong, E-Etah. I'm not s-stupid, I just st-stutter.

Wollof laughed out loud. That was the first time anyone had stood up to her Nastiness in years. Etah turned around to face Wollof. Her eyes burned. Wollof swallowed hard. "It's over," he said quietly, almost in a whisper. "I think I knew what was wrong all along, but was afraid to believe your lies anymore.

Etah saw the questioning eyes of the beasties rest on her. She was beginning to panic and knew she must act quickly.

Some of the beasties moved to stand behind Wollof. Before the others could follow, Etah spoke to them, "How dare you question me? You are all worthless. Each one of you knows your faults and shortcomings. I have made you what you are."

"Don't listen to her, believe in yourself." called out Sam, then Rebecca. And a small chorus of beasties repeated the phrase, "Believe in yourself," over and over again, each time adding another voice.

A few of the beasties followed Etah out of the grove and deep into the forest that afternoon, but many stayed behind.

"It's over!" shouted Wollof. " Etah's reign is finished, thanks to you." And he gave the children a warm hug and patted the tops of their heads with the palm of his hand. It was the beasties' way of expressing a very special thank you.

"Let me out of here!" Dotty started rattling her cage.





## Chapter Nine



e did it! It's Sam," cried Gina, relieved when she saw Phil, Sam, Dotty and Rebecca emerge from the forest. The classmates had been nervously waiting at the park since school ended. "We knew you would make it," Max slapped Sam on the back.

Christopher ran over to Phil and swiped at Dotty trying to knock her off Phil's shoulder. "S-Stop it, Ch-Christopher."





"Why should I listen to you. You stutter," he replied.

"Did you find F-Friendshipville?" Erika mimicked.

"As a matter of fact," Sam started. "It was my fault. Friendshipville is a place I made up." "N-No wait," Phil interrupted. "I d-did find it. Right here." Phil pointed to himself. "I learned that fr-friend-shipville begins with m-me. I-I need to be myself rather than always worrying about how others l-look at me."

Phil, Rebecca and Sam all smiled at each other. "How about playing catch, Phil?" asked Sam.

The classmates were puzzled. "But, Sam you never let Phil play," they chanted in unison.

"Things can change," Sam noted as he picked up a ball from the ground and tossed it to Phil.

The others stared at Sam, Rebecca and Phil playing together. Gradually, one by one, they joined in. Max flung the ball high in the air.

Phil ran fast as he could. He lunged and caught the ball on the tips of his fingers falling to the turf and knocking Dotty to the ground.

Dotty pulled herself up dusting off her freshly laundered baseball uniform. "What a catch," she marveled.

"I-I knew I c-could do it!"

*The End*





