

The Tree Seekers

The Tree Seekers

Mike Krath

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

The Tree Seekers

Copyright © 2005 by Mike Krath

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-35553-2 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-80036-0 (ebk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-35553-6 (pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-80036-X (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

To my children, their children, and their children's children

(Beyond that, they're on their own)

Contents

<i>A Very, Very, Very Short Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
Beneath a Rock	1
A Pixie Surprise	15
Becky, the Pig Queen	31
Matthew, the Annoyed	40
Mary and Elizabeth, the Two Little Terrors	47
Jonathan, the Stinkpot	59
Rescuing Miss Becky Boo	67
A Dwarf's Sword	79
Goblins in the Forest	89
In the Forest of Large Squirrels	98
The Gelfelchin	114
A Bark, a Snort, and a Meow	123
On the Right Path	136
The Gelfelchin's Last Battle	149
The Tree of Balance	162
Back to the Beginning	164

A Very, Very, Very Short Preface

Here is where I write why I wrote what I wrote, and then some.

But first, a special thanks to Darrell for his initial proofreading of my manuscript (a manuscript he will now fail to recognize after my countless rewrites); to my wife, family, and friends for their encouragement and two bits' worth of suggestions; and to my children for reading and then rereading this book until their eyes bulged out. And a special thanks to Becky for her cover artwork suggestion (which is meaningless now since I changed the title). And to Jon for his helpful dialogue suggestions.

And now back to why I wrote what I wrote, and then some...it began with a short, short story I wrote for my children called, "High and Lifted Up." I wanted a longer story to read at the dinner table, so I took "High and Lifted Up" and tried to expand it.

What you read is the result.

That is it in a nutshell.

And so, without further babbling, here is *The Tree Seekers*.

Enjoy.

Mike Krath

Keller, Texas 2005

Beneath a Rock

Once upon a time (a time that once was upon something or other), there were five children who lived in a small house at the edge of a large field that stood between it and some woods—Becky, Jonathan, Matthew, Elizabeth, and Mary Harrington.

Becky—known to some of her friends as Miss Becky Boo—was the oldest of the Harrington children at twelve. After her came Jonathan at a pleasantly plump old age of ten. Then Matthew (named after the saint who wrote the Gospel, though he was anything but a saint and not everyone’s idea of good news) clocked in at nine. Last came the *darling* twins, Mary (who rubbed her nose at birth rather than sucked her thumb) and Elizabeth (who did not rub her nose at birth, but sucked her thumb, and still sucked her thumb, and no matter what you said or did, would not stop sucking her thumb) at seven (almost eight) years.

Becky was the tallest of all her siblings. Jonathan was slightly shorter than Becky. Matthew was slightly, slightly shorter than Jonathan. And the twins were the shortest of all, except that they were as tall as a normal-size third-grader (if “normal size” is normal at all) even though they were in the first grade (they were in the same grade because they were twins, you see, and neither of them had been held back...yet).

They all had brown hair and brown eyes, except Becky, who had beautiful hazel eyes. The girls' hair was curly; the boys' hair was straight. And everyone was thin, except for Jonathan.

Becky was the ruler of the roost, the Queen of all. Jonathan was the, um, cautious one, having his, er, well-rounded pink belly to think of. Matthew was the rash one, handsome (or so he thought), knew more than he thought, and thought not much of anything...unless it was the threat of the twins removing the plug from his video game console for his endless teasing of them. And Mary and Elizabeth, the identical twins, wore identical matching clothes, watched identical TV shows, read identical books, and most of all, had an identical dislike for Matthew for making their identical lives identically miserable.

Now, one summer morning at that time that was once upon something (or other), Becky dressed the twins in identical clothes and then took them out to the back porch to show them a book with a drawing of a compass on its front cover. The book was filled with illustrations of fairies, pixies, imps, sprites, and goblins, and then there were some oddball drawings of pigs, wee little men holding toy swords, and a ghost in a haunted house. The boys tagged along, not having anything better to do.

"What's the book about?" Matthew said.

"It's a fairy picture book. I found it in the public library," Becky said. "Funny, it wasn't on the computer. The librarian had to fill out a card."

A white piece of paper slipped out of the fairy picture book and fell to the floor.

Jonathan, who was stuffing a large chocolate fudge brownie into his mouth, stopped long enough to say, "Uh-oh. Did you rip that page?"

"No, I didn't," Becky said, puzzled to see this since she had held the fairy picture book tightly in her hands. She picked the paper up and examined it. "This...this is not part of this book."

"What is it?" Matthew (the genius boy) asked.

Becky looked up with a surprised expression. "It's...it's..."

"What?"

"It's a drawing of the field behind our house." Becky held up the drawing for her brothers and sisters to see.

"You're right," Matthew said (it did not take much genius to recognize this). "I wonder who drew it."

"I don't know," Becky said. "I don't think any of the kids in this area did it. It's too good." (She could draw stick figures and bumpy clouds, and that was about it.)

"Look!" Jonathan said. "There's an arrow pointing to the largest rock in the field."

"There is?" Becky turned the drawing around. "You're right, Jonathan. There *is* an arrow, and there's something written in tiny letters." She brought the drawing close to her face to read the fine print:

To open the largest rock in the field, half-buried in the ground, push here.

"Push what?" asked Matthew.

"The paper?" Jonathan asked.

Becky pushed the paper. Nothing happened.

"Hmm," Becky said. "There must be something like a button on the large rock that you have to push."

"Let's see," Matthew said.

"Yes, let's," the twins piped up, jumping up and down as Matthew glared at them.

They hurried out into the field to the largest rock, half-buried in the ground, and they looked all over it for a button.

"Do you see it?" Matthew said.

"I don't," said Jonathan. "Where's the arrow pointing to in the drawing?"

"It's pointing to the top of the rock," Becky said, pointing to the paper and then to the top of the rock.

"We should all sit on the top of the rock, then," Matthew suggested.

"That's a good idea," Becky said.

They scrambled up the large rock and sat on its top. They waited a minute, nothing; two minutes, still nothing. After awhile, the two boys pretended to be a bunch of chickens trying to hatch a large egg.

"Cluck, cluck," Jonathan said.

"Bawk!" said Matthew, flapping his arms.

"I guess we're not heavy enough to push whatever it is we're supposed to push," Becky said glumly. "Let's go back to the porch."

The rock trembled.

"No, wait! Do you feel something?" said Matthew.

The rock moved back and forth.

"The rock is shaking!" said Matthew.

"I guess we pushed the right button," Jonathan said.

The rock swayed back and forth, back and forth.

"Whoa!" Jonathan yelled, throwing his arms up. "I'm not sure I like this ride!"

"Everybody off before we get hurt," Becky called.

They jumped to the ground and moved quickly away from the rock. As they watched, the rock stopped its swaying, and then, with an astonishing loud creaking sound, slowly lifted itself out of the ground and swung around as if on hinges.

Mary clutched Elizabeth's arm in awe.

Matthew took a step back onto Jonathan's foot. "Will you look at that?"

"Ouch! Watch where you're going," Jonathan said.

Becky put her hand to her mouth. "How is this possible?"

Suddenly, Elizabeth and Mary jumped up and down and pointed to the ground. "Look, under the rock, a door."

"I saw it first," Matthew called.

"No, you didn't, Matthew," Mary retorted.

"I did."

"You didn't!"

Becky stared. A few feet from where she stood, where the rock had been, there was an opening in the ground (not exactly a door), with stone steps going down. She gasped, "What's this?" and stepped closer and carefully looked in. The stairs were dark and damp with a musty odor. For a moment, she thought she smelled candy, but quickly dismissed this as her imagination. At the bottom, she could make out the outline of an entrance leading off to the left. Suddenly, an array of colors flashed out of that doorway, danced on the walls, and then went out. Her eyes grew wide. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Jonathan replied.

"Colorful lights at the end of the staircase?"

Matthew and the twins stopped fighting.

"Colorful lights?" Matthew asked.

"Yes, at the bottom of these stairs."

They all stared.

Nothing.

"I saw something, I really did," Becky defended herself.

The colorful lights flashed a second time and then disappeared.

"See? Did you see it?" Becky said.

"Yes," Jonathan said.

The colorful lights flashed a third time.

"There it is again!" Becky said.

"I saw it first!" said Matthew.

Becky rolled her eyes.

"What do you think it is?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know," Becky said.

"I want to find out," Mary said. She grabbed the rail eagerly.

"Wait, Mary," Becky said. "Let me go first."

"No, I'll go first," Matthew said and stepped on Mary's foot.

"Hey!" Mary said.

"No, I'll go first!" Becky said. "I'm the oldest."

"Fine, you do that," Matthew said. He bowed and waved his hand. "After you, fair pig princess."

"Don't mind if I do," Becky snorted, ignoring the insult. She went slowly down the stairs one step at a time with her head up haughtily (as only fair for a pig princess). The others eagerly followed.

"Hold the rail so you won't slip," Becky said.

"This rail feels weird," Matthew said.

"Yes, it feels squishy," Jonathan said.

Before Becky could consider what the rail felt like, the colorful lights flashed brighter than ever before, and then dimmed; became bright again, then dimmed.

She stopped and put up her hand.

"What's wrong?" Matthew said.

"Um," Becky turned to her siblings. "I just had a thought. What if those lights are caused by a broken electrical wire? What if we all get shocked? I think you better wait here, and let me go down first and find out."

"Yes," Jonathan said. "Yes, good idea." He took her hand and shook it. "You're very brave."

"Good luck," Matthew said, and slapped her on the back. "Don't fry."

Becky frowned.

"Be careful," the twins said.

"I will," Becky said. She continued her cautious pace down the stairs. "My," she thought, "what if I get shocked myself? I must be insane wanting to do this." At the last step, she gripped the edge of the opening and inched her head around the corner, slowly, meticulously, carefully. "Please, don't let it be a broken wire. Please." Suddenly, she caught sight of what was behind the opening, and her eyes popped literally out of her head (or at least they would have if they could; she could almost hear the "boi-oi-oing" sound). She gripped the edge of the opening tighter and exclaimed:

"No! How? I can't believe it!"

"What?" Matthew asked.

"Hurry!"

"No, I don't want to fry!" Jonathan said.

"It's okay. Hurry!" Becky motioned with her hand for them to come as though a bee was around her head and she was trying to swat it away.

Within seconds, her siblings joined her, and when they put their heads around the corner and saw what she was looking at, all four of their mouths dropped open at once. For, as far as they could make out, lush rolling hills, flowers in all colors of the rainbow, trees with the greenest of all leaves, and streams of crystal-clear blue running water winding their way among the trees, lay before them and dazzled their eyes.

Becky shook her head. "It's...it's unbelievable."

"What is this place?" Matthew said. "And why is it under our field?"

"Especially since it has a blue sky as well," Jonathan said in a way that showed that he knew that blue skies didn't normally exist under fields, or at least they shouldn't.

"A blue sky?" Becky said. And sure enough, when she checked, there was an underground sky filled with pink and white wispy clouds.

"It must be another dimension," Matthew remarked. "That's the only explanation." (How smart he was from watching all that science fiction on TV!)

"Another dimension?" Jonathan said nervously.

"We're scared," the twins said and grabbed Jonathan's pants.

"Don't be afraid," Becky urged. "This land looks harmless enough. Let's explore."

"No!" the twins said.

"Count me out," Jonathan said. "What if we can't come back? How are we going to live? How are we going to eat?"

"I'm with Becky," Matthew said. "Let's explore."

"No!" the twins said even louder.

"Yes!" Matthew said even more loudly.

"No!" the twins said even more loudly than Matthew.

Then Matthew screamed, "Yes!" and the twins screamed, "No!" at the same time, holding the same note until Becky said, "Stop shouting! We're going in!" And she walked out into the strange land without a care in the world that the large rock might close over the entrance or the door might shut as soon as she left the staircase. Matthew followed her while Jonathan and the twins watched trembling from the door.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

"What's that crunching sound?" Matthew asked.

"It's coming from beneath our feet," Becky said. She looked down and saw the grass and flowers had been crushed and broken into tiny pieces. "Uh..."

"What plants are those?" Matthew said. "You'd think they're made of glass."

"They did break rather easily," Becky said. She bent down to pick up a broken yellow flower petal.

"No, you'll get hurt!" the twins said.

"I know what I'm doing," Becky said. She rubbed the yellow flower between her fingers. "It doesn't seem to be glass." She brought it to her nose and sniffed it. "Hmm..."

"What does it smell like?" Matthew asked.

Becky looked up. "Butterscotch."

"Butterscotch?"

Becky put the petal in her mouth.

The twins screamed and clutched each other.

Becky smiled. "It's sweet, delicious, scrumptious, lip-smacking butterscotch."

"It is?" Jonathan said. He immediately walked into the land, picked up a blade of grass, and popped it into his mouth. "It tastes like candy."

The twins stopped screaming. "Candy?" They ran out, picked several flowers and put them into their mouths.

"Cherry." Mary had a half-eaten rose. One side of her cheek jutted out.

The opposite side of Elizabeth's mouth protruded in an equal manner. She held a broken dandelion in her hand and managed, "Le...le...lemon."

"Gumdrops...*mmff*...jellybeans...*gag*..." Jonathan had crammed a whole bunch of flowers into his mouth.

"Is it possible?" Becky looked this way and that. "The entire land is nothing but sugar?"

"A whole country made of candy?" Matthew put his hand to his head. "I feel faint. I'm dizzy. Such a great place."

Becky spotted a stream. "I wonder what that tastes like." She ran to the stream, knelt by its bank, cupped her hand, scooped up some of its cool liquid and drank it. "Mmm, soda."

The others joined her and lapped the water with their tongues like a bunch of dirty old hound dogs. *Slurp. Slurp. Slurp.*

Matthew splashed the twins.

"Hey!" Mary and Elizabeth said. They splashed Matthew back in the face.

"My eyes!" Matthew said. "Twins, what are you doing? I'm going to hit you both!" He made a fist and pounded it in his hand.

At that moment, a sparkle in the stream caught Becky's eye. She looked up and saw the light flashing again. "There," she said, pointing. "That's where the light's coming from. Follow me."

They hurried toward the top of the green hill, but before they reached it, they discovered a garden with a sculptured assortment of gnomes, trolls, dwarves, and elves, holding orbs, crowns, and

royal cloaks. Among them towered a large white statue, wielding a bright orange sword.

Becky stared at the large white statue with a sense of awe and wonder. "What a beautiful angel."

"How do you know that statue is an angel?" Matthew said.

"Uh, it says 'angel' right under it," Becky said, pointing to the word "angel" engraved on the statue's pedestal, "not to mention it looks like an angel, genius boy."

"I wonder who made it," Elizabeth said.

"I don't know." Becky looked all around. "I don't see anyone."

Suddenly, a piece of the angel's pedestal fell to the ground.

Plop.

Jonathan could not resist accusing Becky. "You broke it."

"I did nothing of the sort," Becky replied. "How could I? I never touched it." She bent down and picked up the piece.

"Now you touched it," Jonathan said.

Becky ignored Jonathan's stupid remark, and then looked at the piece of pedestal in her hand for the longest time.

Matthew frowned. "Aren't you going to eat it? If you're too scared, give it to me."

"Quiet," Becky said. "Of course I'm going to eat it." She bit into the piece, chewed it this way and that, and then half-closed her eyes with a smile on her face.

Matthew stared. "Well? What is it?"

"Chocolate," Becky said. "Heavenly...chocolate."

The children ran to the statue with their arms outstretched, but before they could even attempt to take even the tiniest bit of chocolate and devour the statue to the ground, the light flashed for the umpteenth time, and Becky spoiled everyone's fun by saying:

"There's the light again. We'll come back and eat chocolate later. Come on."

She ran to the top of the hill, and as soon as she could see what was on the other side, her mouth dropped open. "I can't believe it," she whispered.

"What?" Matthew said. He joined her and his mouth dropped open even wider.

Drop!

The twins made it to the top, and when they saw what the others were seeing, they dropped their jaws even more.

DROP! DROP!

But when Jonathan met up with them, his mouth opened wider and farther than all four of his siblings' put together.

**D
R
O
P
!**

For, this time, instead of candied flowers and carbonated soda springs or a marvelous sculptured garden, a magnificent jeweled tree stood before them. Gems of all sizes and shapes and colors of the rainbow made up its trunk and branches. Its leaves appeared to be made of solid jade with veins of emerald. At its base, a diamond fence enclosed it, seemingly to keep trespassers away.

The children marveled at the sight.

"Whoa!" Matthew said.

"Amazing," Jonathan said.

"Cool," Mary said.

Elizabeth sucked her thumb in awe (and sucked, and sucked, and sucked).

The tree limbs vibrated and moved, which caused the colorful light to go off in all directions. One beam struck Becky's face and she quickly shielded her eyes with the picture book. "How bright!"

"That's why we could see it even in the staircase," Matthew said.

"Yes," Becky said. "And we could see the light and then not see it because the tree moved."

"And without any wind, too," Jonathan said. "What an unusual tree."

"It's a very interesting tree, isn't it?" Becky said. She drew closer to the diamond fence and looked up at the magnificent tree. "I wonder what it's doing here."

"I know, I know," Matthew said, raising his hand even though there wasn't a teacher to be seen, probably for miles and miles.

"What?" Becky asked.

"To balance something," Matthew replied.

"Balance something?" Becky said.

"Read the sign at the base." (Touché.)

Becky looked at the foot of the tree and saw a small golden sign with the following words in purple, cursive lettering:

The Tree of Balance

Warning

Look...Don't Touch

"The Tree of Balance?" she said.

"I told you," Matthew said, wagging his finger (the impertinence).

"What's it balancing?" Jonathan said.

This time, Elizabeth raised her hand.

"Yes?" Becky said.

"Maybe itself?" Elizabeth said.

Becky waited for Elizabeth to continue her line of reasoning. "Well? Go on."

"Maybe if you remove a gem from one of its branches, it tips over," Elizabeth said. "That's why its sign says, 'Don't Touch.' It must break very easily."

"Hmm," Becky said. "Maybe you're right. That would make sense, wouldn't it? How very clever for you to think that—especially for a seven-year-old...almost eight, that is."

Elizabeth smiled.

Mary had a somber face. "What if the tree offers you a jewel? Can you touch it then?"

"No," Becky answered. "The sign says 'Don't Touch.' We don't want it toppling over on us."

"What if it's a ruby with a shade of red that matches my already splendidous red outfit?"

"Splendidous?" Becky had a strange feeling that something was not right (especially with Mary talking so adult-like at that moment, using big words that probably had no meaning). She turned and saw a red gem glistening in Mary's palm. "Mary! You didn't?"

"I couldn't help it," Mary said. "The tree bent one of its branches near me and wanted me to take it."

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

"You took it. I saw you!" Matthew said.

"No, you didn't!" Elizabeth said to Matthew. "You were too busy eating chocolate."

"What are you talking about?" Matthew said, dropping some of the angel's pedestal from his hands.

At that moment, the ground trembled hard and the children shook back and forth.

"W-w-what's that?" Jonathan said. "A-a-an ear-ear-earth-quake?"

"It's the t-t-tree," Matthew cried. "Look! It's sh-sh-shaking."

The children stood spellbound, if standing is what you could call it while the ground shook. The tree trunk moved before them like a charmed snake or a hula dancer or anything that went wiggle. *Wiggle. Wiggle. Wiggle.* Its branches whipped up and down, jewels fell right and left to the ground (nice rhyme, huh?).

Plunk! Plunk! Plunk!

With a loud sucking noise, the tree sank into the earth.

Becky struggled to keep her balance. "Mary, look what you've done by touching that tree...you've killed it."

"But..." Mary said, but Becky did not hear her, as Elizabeth shouted at the top of her lungs:

"The dirt's moving!"

"We're being dragged toward the tree," Jonathan said.

"Everything is!" Matthew said.

Becky managed to stay on her feet as rock candy, almond bark, and sugary goo flowed past her. She grabbed Mary's and Elizabeth's hands.

"What do we do now?" Jonathan said. "Put some of this melted candy in our pockets so we can eat it later?"

"Run for the stairs," Becky cried.

They hurried over the melting landscape. As they neared the garden, they watched in horrific amazement as the carved statues crumbled and dropped their crowns, royal cloaks, and scepters to the ground. Gnomes, trolls, and elves fell over and were carried away by the gooey current. The marvelous white chocolate angel broke free of its dissolving pedestal and collapsed in front of them, turning its orange sword back and forth.

Becky dodged it. "This way!"

"The staircase is melting as well," Matthew said.

"Quick," Becky said.

"The handrails are flowing downward," Jonathan yelled.

"The exit is closing," Elizabeth said in a high-pitched voice.

"Faster," Becky shouted.

They tried to climb the stairs, but, alas, it was too late. The stairs melted away, and the children were left struggling to stand against the current of gooey mess. And before they could do much else, the clouds, the sky, and everything else above them, melted and rained down on them, and then, with a loud *swooooosh!*, the entire land went down the hole, including the light of the underground paradise, until all that was left was darkness.

A Pixie Surprise

"Becky? Are you there?" Matthew asked.

Silence.

"Becky?"

"Yes," Becky said, gaining her wits about her.

"What happened?" Jonathan said.

"I don't know," Becky said, but then, "Yes, I do know!" She turned to Mary (and how she did this in the dark was a feat in itself). "Mary, look what you've done by touching that tree!"

"I didn't touch it," Mary said.

"You did."

"I didn't. It offered the ruby to me."

"You're lying," snapped Matthew.

"If I could find your face in the dark right now, I'd slap it," Becky said.

"What are we going to do?" Jonathan said, wringing his hands (if you could see him). "How are we going to get out?"

"I don't know," Becky said. "I really don't..."

"Wait! Look!" Matthew said. "It's getting lighter."

"And lighter," Jonathan said.

"And..."

And before Matthew could get in one more "lighter," the Harrington children found themselves in daylight, with a large desert on

three sides, and on the fourth a forest with red and yellow falling leaves.

"What is this? Where are we?" Matthew said. "Is this for real?" He touched a cactus plant and then pulled his hand away. "Ouch. It *is* for real."

A nearby crow appeared interested in the children. Suddenly, it lifted its wings and flew toward the forest. "No place to go, no place to hide," it cawed.

"Did you hear that?" Jonathan said. "Did that bird just say something?"

"Um, uh," Becky said, but the fairy picture book, which she had been clutching tightly all the way from home, was moving back and forth in her hand as if alive.

"I think it did," Matthew said. "Did you hear it, Becky?"

"Uh..."

The crow landed on a large branch of a large tree at the edge of the forest and watched them all with piercing black eyes.

"What's wrong with you, Becky?" Jonathan said. "Did you hear the bird or not?"

"I...uh..." The fairy picture book jumped out of Becky's hand and landed hard on the ground.

Thump.

"Oh!"

"Lovely fall weather we're having this morning, isn't it?" the crow pronounced in a loud voice.

"That bird *did* speak!" Mary said. "Look! There it is in that large tree near the forest."

"Let's see if it will talk again," Elizabeth said.

The twins ran off, not looking where they were going, not caring in the least that they were in a strange place, and each managing to step on the fairy picture book that was on the ground.

Stomp. Stomp.

Becky noticed, as they trampled the fairy picture book, that it now lay open to a page with words in big letters (and dirty foot-prints—those two were really going to get it if the library fined her for them). In fact, the letters were so huge that she could not help but read them:

*Don't pout,
Don't shout,
Follow the blue light,
If you want a way out...
That's a right!*

"That's a right?" she said. "What a stupid poem."

"What is?" Jonathan said.

"The fairy picture book is opened to a dumb poem."

Suddenly, Mary and Elizabeth screamed:

"It's a monster!" Elizabeth said.

"No, two!" Mary returned.

Becky looked up.

"The twins are screaming!" Jonathan said.

"Yes, I can hear they are," Becky replied. "But about what?" She picked up the fairy picture book. "C'mon, let's go see."

They hurried to the twins, who were clutching each other at the edge of the forest. Their faces were pale. They were staring at the mouth of a small underground tunnel.

"What's wrong?" Becky asked.

"We saw a blue light coming from this tunnel," Mary said.

"It flashed and stopped," Elizabeth said. "It can't be the tree. The tree's gone."

"It's a blue monster," Mary said.

"A blue monster?" Becky looked into the tunnel. A blue light flashed, and then stopped. "The blue light!" Becky said excitedly. "Yes! The blue light! The book says to follow the blue light if we want

to find our way out. This must be the way out! There must be another staircase at the end of this tunnel!"

"You think?" Matthew said.

"It has to be," Becky said. "C'mon."

She crawled eagerly into the passageway, followed by Elizabeth, Mary, Matthew, and then Jonathan in the rear (who struggled and strained to get inside the tunnel, but finally managed, thank you very much).

After ten feet, Jonathan commented:

"How long is this tunnel? This ground is hurting my knees."

"I don't know," Becky said. After a few more feet, she said, "I think I see a light ahead."

"I think I do, too," Matthew said. He froze. "Wait a minute; what's that?"

"What?"

"Above us. I hear something."

Becky strained her ears. "I don't hear anything."

"Listen."

"Man, you're crazy," Mary said.

"No, I hear voices."

Becky stopped crawling. Voices gradually grew louder.

"They're here. I smell them," a raspy voice said.

Mary shut up.

"Someone's up there. See?" Matthew said.

"Shh," Becky said.

"Stupid goblin. There's no one buried in the ground. Is that what you think?" an irritable voice answered.

"I don't know. I'm not that smart, but I do have a keen sense of smell."

"My senses are as good as the next goblin. There's no one beneath us."

"I know what I smell, and I smell what I know."

"Goblins?" Becky whispered.

"She said the children would be nearby, perhaps in the forest," the irritable goblin said. "That's where their stench's coming from. Not here, not under the dirt."

"Perhaps, but I don't think so," the raspy-voiced goblin replied in an even more raspy voice. "I've been sniffing out children for 301 years. What do you know? You've only been doing it for 300."

"They don't sound very friendly," Jonathan said.

"Shh," Matthew said. "You don't want them to hear us."

"Shh, yourself," Jonathan said.

"Matthew's right, Jonathan. Shh." Becky felt her heart pounding.

"I didn't say anything," Mary said.

"I wasn't talking to you. Shh," Becky said.

"Me either," Elizabeth said.

"Shh," Becky said.

"Everyone shush," Jonathan said.

"Shh!" Becky said, and then punched Matthew in the arm before he could say, "Shh," again in a joking manner, as she just knew he was going to.

"Well," the irritable goblin said. "I know this. If we stand here gazing at this ground, someone is going to beat us to the children, and she won't give us any money."

"But she promised *us* a million gems," the raspy-voiced goblin said.

"She promised a million gems to the first creature or creatures to bring her the children dead or alive."

Pause.

"I want the money," the raspy-voiced goblin answered. "I want to be the first to find the children."

"Well, then, perhaps your smell is off," the irritable goblin said. "Maybe the children's odor is coming from the forest and is confusing you?"

Another pause.

"Oh," the raspy-voiced goblin growled. "It's futile. They're under the dirt. I know it."

"You want to be rich, don't you?" the irritable goblin asked. "What do we have to lose by searching the forest?"

Silence.

Becky turned to the others and whispered. "You don't think we're the children they're searching for, do you?"

"Why would they be looking for us?" Matthew said.

"Maybe whoever is paying them to look for us is angry with us for touching the Tree of Balance and taking away all their candy," Becky said.

"You think?"

"What should we do?" Jonathan whimpered.

"Let's wait here until they leave, and then crawl out," Becky said. "Hopefully we can get out of this land as quick as we can."

"What if they're waiting for us at the end of this tunnel?" Jonathan said.

"It's a chance we have to take."

After a few minutes, Becky heard what sounded like the sound of one last desperate growl from the first goblin, and then...nothing...except for her own breathing. "I don't hear anything. You think we should leave the tunnel now?"

"No," Jonathan and the twins said in unison.

"Yes!" Matthew squeezed past Becky and began to crawl to the exit where the blue light had appeared.

Becky's eyes grew wide. What if the goblins were still out there? What if they captured Matthew? Oh, no! "Matthew!" Before she could stop him, Matthew left the tunnel and stood up. "Matthew!" She closed her eyes and expected to hear a bloodcurdling scream, but, hearing none, opened them to see Matthew staring back at her.

"Hey," he said. "Nothing's here."

"What?"

"No woods, no flowers, no goblins...nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Come and see."

Becky left the tunnel and look around. Matthew was right. There weren't any woods, flowers, or (thank goodness) goblins. They were in a small grove shaped like a circle. Tall grass lined the edge of it, with here and there a path going out and then down at a sharp angle. "Huh?"

Jonathan stuck his head out of the tunnel. "Hey! Where are the stairs?"

"I don't know," Becky said. She drew near to the beginning of one trail and noticed it twisted and turned as far as she could see. She viewed the other routes through the grass...everything looked identical—all the paths turned and twisted as far as she could see.

"Now what do we do?" Jonathan said.

"I guess we look for another staircase," Becky said.

"I hate stairs!" Elizabeth whined. "My feet hurt."

"Yeah, my stomach hurts," said Jonathan. "How are we going to find another staircase?"

"We should look for another blue light," Matthew said.

"Good idea," Becky said.

They searched in the tall grass for another blue light, but they could not find a blue light or agree where they had last seen it even if they had imagined they had seen it.

Becky shook her head. "This is not good."

"I wish another page would just plop out of that fairy picture book and tell us how to get out of here," Jonathan said.

Becky looked at the fairy picture book. "I wish so too..." She paused. "Huh?" She moved the cover back and forth. With each turn, the drawing of the compass's arrow on its front cover moved in the opposite direction and stopped. "I can't believe it. It works! The picture of the compass on the front cover actually works!"

"It does?" Matthew said, grabbing for the book, but Becky drew it away.

"Yes, and it keeps pointing north. That way," Becky said, following the northerly direction the arrow was pointing to.

Matthew frowned indignantly, wanting to try the book himself.

Suddenly, a blue light flashed and then stopped.

"There's another blue light!" Becky said.

"Where?" Matthew said disgruntled.

"There! Where the compass's pointing. North," Becky said.

"I don't see a blue light," Jonathan said.

"It was there." Becky studied the foliage where she had seen the blue light. Suddenly, she noticed the faint outline of a trail hidden by the thick brush. "Ah, a trail."

"I still don't see anything," Jonathan said.

"It's here, just difficult to spot," Becky said. "It's a trail that goes due north. It must be the way out."

"You think?" Matthew said, livening up.

"This is where the blue light flashed, and this is the direction the arrow of the compass is pointing."

"And you believe that silly blue light and compass?" a voice proclaimed loudly from behind her.

"What?" Becky said. "Who said that?" She turned to see who had spoken. Jonathan and Matthew stared at her. The twins looked at each other and then at her.

"We thought you did," Elizabeth said.

"Me?"

"No, I did," a voice said.

"There it is again," Jonathan said.

"It came from over here," Matthew said. He walked over to the trail that appeared to be the broadest and the most used and looked around. He shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody's here." He parted the grass with his hands. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Er," Jonathan said. "What if it's a gob...?" He stopped.

Becky looked pensively at him. "What?"

"A gob...?" Jonathan repeated.

"What? A gob?"

"A gob...a gob...?"

"What? What?"

"A goblin!" a voice screamed out.

"Oh my!" Becky said.

Before she could express herself further, a small child sprang from the grass right in front of her and screamed:

"Greetings, you little ragamuffins!"

Becky gasped, the twins grabbed each other, and Matthew jumped back, landing on Jonathan's foot (as usual).

The small child fell to the ground and laughed. "Scared you, didn't I?" He held his stomach and rolled back and forth. He chuckled, chortled, and guffawed all at the same time. "You should've seen the looks on your faces."

Jonathan hopped up and down in the background, holding his foot.

Becky stared at the merry prankster, who wore green from head to foot. She crossed her arms. "That wasn't funny."

"No, it wasn't," said Matthew.

"Ow!" Jonathan said.

"Oh, but it was," the small child replied and beat the ground with his tiny fists. "Oh, but it was. How I enjoyed doing it!"

"Did you?" Becky asked sarcastically.

"Didn't you find it fun?" the small child said.

"No," Becky said.

"It was high-larious."

"It wasn't."

"I thought it was."

"Well, you're only making yourself laugh, then," Becky said. Suddenly, a little splatter of mud hit her arm from the small child pound-

ing the ground. She looked at it and then at the small child and then at her arm and back to the small child and finally could do nothing but laugh. "Well, I can see that your joke is more on you than on us."

"What do you mean?" The small child stopped hitting the earth and stared at her.

Becky had an amused expression. "You're getting your little green outfit all dirty."

"What?" The small child looked at his clothes and stood up. "Oh, oh...what have I done? What have I done?" He tried to brush the dirt off his clothes, but instead, rubbed it even further into the cloth. "No, no, this is horrible!"

"Serves you right," Becky said. "Jumping out like that, scaring us to death." She bit her lip and tried not to laugh.

The small child quit wiping and glared at Becky angrily. "This is your fault, you know."

"Mine?"

"If you hadn't been here, I wouldn't have been tempted to frighten you."

"You did it yourself. You're to blame." Becky did not accept this accusation in the least.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not, I'm not." The small child jumped up and down. As he did, his long brown hair flopped this way and that and revealed pointed ears.

Becky recognized this small child from one of her picture books. "Why, I know what you are! You're a pixie."

The pixie turned this way and that. "How do you know that?"

"I saw your picture in this fairy picture book," Becky said.

"You did? Let me see."

"Here." Becky flipped it open to a picture of a pixie and held the fairy picture book up for the pixie to see.

The pixie frowned. "Those paparazzi! Always taking our pictures and publishing them in books for humans. None of their business. Why, I oughta..."

"So you *are* a pixie," Becky said.

"Yeah, yeah, that's correct," the pixie said.

At this point, you might think Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins would be stunned and fascinated that this small child was indeed a real, true-to-life pixie. But after recovering from Matthew stepping on his foot, Jonathan was arguing with Matthew about which one was a clumsy oaf, and the twins...well...the twins had lost interest and decided to pick some grass.

"A real pixie?" Becky said.

"Why do you keep asking? You wanna take my picture too?"

"No, it's only that I've never met a pixie before."

"Well, now that you've met me, get out of my land," the pixie said.

"Your land?" Becky said.

"Yeah, mine and all the others in it, but not for you—you stinking mortals. Get lost!"

"Fine, we will," Becky said. "You're very rude. We wouldn't stay in your land if you paid us." She turned back to the overgrown trail and moved the grass away. "C'mon," she said to the others. "Let's go."

Jonathan and Matthew kept on arguing and the twins kept on busily picking grass.

"Wait." The pixie unexpectedly changed his disposition. "You're really leaving? You're not staying? I mean, I mean...I'm, I'm sorry. Yeah, that's it. Please excuse me. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I was only playing...playing the part of a wisecracking kid. Yeah, that's it. So what do you say? Am I forgiven or what?"

The pixie looked so cute that Becky didn't have the heart not to forgive him. "Apology accepted," she said, pinching his cheeks.

"Hey, watch it, sister," the pixie said, and then, "So, so...no problem then, right?"

"No, none," Becky said.

"That's good, that's good."

Becky put her foot through the tall grass.

The pixie grabbed Becky's pants and tugged on them. "Wait a minute. Don't you wanna stay a bit and play with me?"

"Uh...no."

"We can have a lot of fun."

"I'm sorry, but we really need to be on our way."

"Why, why? What's the rush?"

"We want to go home," Becky said. "We think there may be goblins after us, and we want to get out of here before they find us."

Jonathan stomped on Matthew's foot.

"Goblins? Horrible creatures. I stay outta their way whenever I see them, yes, I do," said the pixie.

"My thoughts, precisely," Becky said.

"And you think that's the way out?" the pixie said.

"This book says it is," Becky said.

"You must be in trouble then, big trouble," the pixie said.

"What do you mean?"

The twins cheered as both Jonathan and Matthew wrestled to the ground.

"Only those who touch the Tree of Balance ever travel on that trail," the pixie said.

"The Tree of Balance?" Becky said. "What about the Tree of Balance?"

"All I know is that those who touch the Tree of Balance are responsible to find it and bring it back or they can't go home, no they can't," the pixie said, and then did a little dance, swaying side to side. "La-la-la."

"Can't go home?" Becky said, and then looked at her brothers and sisters, who were not paying her the least bit of attention.

"No, no, can't go home," the pixie said, and did a little twirl. "La-la."

"But the book didn't say anything about bringing back the tree or we couldn't go home," Becky said. "All it said was follow the blue light if we wanted out."

"Read it again," the pixie said, and clapped his tiny hands.

Becky opened the book and immediately saw on the very first page she opened to:

Rule Number 498,730: Any mortal whoever who touches the Tree of Balance is hereby bound, obligated, and responsible to return it to where it was touched, or forever remain a prisoner in this underground land until they do or else be tarred and feathered by all other inhabitants, who can't eat any candy or go up any staircases because they all melted when that stupid tree was touched.

Becky looked up. "This is not good."

"And it's not all, not all at all," the pixie said, and stopped his dancing. "The Tree of Balance changes shape once it's been touched."

"Changes shape?"

Jonathan pinned Matthew, and the twins clapped.

"Yeah, yeah, a squirrel, a pig, an ogre; anything. So not only must you bring the tree back, you must find it first. And good luck doing that. But I'll tell you what," the pixie continued before any of the Harrington children (okay, well, Becky only) could react to what he had just said. "I think I know where the Tree of Balance is, yes I do. I thought I saw something that looked like the Tree of Balance not too long ago on the broad path. I did, I thought I did. It was walking about handing out sweets. Chocolate s'mores and delicious apple pie with vanilla ice cream and coconut cream, lemon meringue, and..." The pixie stared at Becky with green, cat-like eyes. "Chocolate fudge."

"Chocolate fudge?" The other children quickly came into the conversation.

"Chocolate fudge? Really?" Becky said.

"Yeah," the pixie said.

"And peach cobbler?" Jonathan said with growing excitement (along with heavy breathing).

"Lots of it, brother." The pixie rubbed his belly. "This tree had tons of sweets for the taking. You want some?"

"Wait a minute," Matthew said skeptical (and panting). "How could that tree be the Tree of Balance? I thought you said it changed shape?" (And you thought he wasn't listening, didn't you?)

"This tree had legs, big ones," said the pixie. "I'd think that's odd for a tree, wouldn't you?" He fell to the ground, put his head between his legs and rolled over.

"But the book says to follow the blue light to find the way out," Becky said. "And the compass on its cover pointed to this northern path where the blue light flashed. How do we know the Tree of Balance didn't go north?"

"That could very well be," said the pixie, hopping up and holding his arms outstretched. "The geography in this underground land is unique, very unique. You go north and find yourself in the south. The tree may have gone north and ended up back here. It's very possible, you know."

"Where did the Tree of Balance get all this food?" Matthew asked. "It didn't have any food when we saw it."

"It was in a land of candy," Jonathan reminded him. "Maybe it had a bakery in its trunk?"

"Not a bakery," Elizabeth said. "A *barkery*."

Mary giggled.

"Ah, that's probably right!" Matthew said, hungry for dessert.

"Yes, that makes sense." Becky's mouth watered at the thought of chocolate fudge.

"You know," the pixie said. "Why don't you go down the broad path and find this tree. If it turns out that it's not the Tree of Balance,

what do you have to lose? You can always turn around and go north like the book says.”

“And pig out before we do,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, yeah, it would be such a delicious diversion, wouldn’t it?” The pixie licked his ruby-red lips.

Jonathan salivated. “Food, yummy food.”

Becky turned toward the broad path, a very used trail, and then to her brothers and sisters. “Well, you want to go see what this weird tree’s all about and see if it might be the Tree of Balance?”

“We want candy!” they screamed without hesitation.

“Okay then,” Becky said. “Let’s go get that tree.”

“Yeah!” Their stomachs all growled.

“Oh, and one last thing that I should mention that you might find interesting. Yeah, one last thing,” the pixie said. “This tree was also giving out jewels.”

“It was?” Becky said.

“Yeah, yeah,” the pixie replied. “And if I weren’t so rich myself, I’d be running after it lickety-split. Anyway, have a successful journey and enjoy all that candy and wealth. Bye now. Bye-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Becky said. “You’ve been very kind. Thank you for telling us about the tree and all. You can jump out and scare us anytime you want. Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you. Good-bye.”

“Bye-bye, bye-bye now.”

The children walked down the broad path, slowly at first, then at a quicker pace, and finally, thinking about all that delicious food and gems, they ran as fast as they could, each trying to be the first to get to the tree.

“Me!” one said.

“No, me!” another said.

In their haste, they rushed ahead when the road split into many trails. And, instead of coming to a decision as to where they needed to go together, they each went down a different path. Mary and Elizabeth took a narrow one, Matthew a well-trodden

one, Becky a wide one, while Jonathan forged ahead into the grass creating a trail as he went.

Alas! It was not long before they realized their choices led to nowhere but a steep embankment, and before they could do anything about it, they each fell off and tumbled down to who knows where.

~ ~ ~

And if they had been able to see the playful pixie, they would have seen that he was not standing, but lying on the ground, laughing up a storm, and holding in his hand a gold coin that a strange creature had given to him to trick the children.

Becky, the Pig Queen

Becky tumbled for what seemed like an eternity, finally landing on a soft bed of grass.

Thump!

"Oh," she said. "Where am I?" She looked around her. Her eyes focused on what seemed to be green, rolling hills going for miles before her. Flowers and butterflies covered the countryside. She turned around to see where she had fallen.

The embankment went straight up.

"What?" she exclaimed. "I can't see the top for the clouds.

"Jonathan? Matthew? Elizabeth? Mary? Can you hear me? I'm down here." (She never guessed, even in the slightest—would you?—that Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins had tumbled to different spots several miles apart.)

Silence (for obvious reasons).

She called out again more loudly, hurting her throat (oh, if she had only known that her brothers and sisters could not hear her):

"Jonathan? Matthew? Elizabeth? Mary?"

Nothing.

She got up. "Maybe they fell with me?" (Maybe not.) She looked around but did not see anyone.

"Oh, this is horrible!" she said. "That's the last time I listen to a mischievous pixie. I knew I should have trusted the fairy picture book's

advice, and followed the blue light. Now, how am I going to get back to my brothers and sisters? How, how, how?"

A few pebbles skipped down the embankment and landed near her feet.

She picked up several and then, with her eyes, followed the path they might have taken on their journey from the top. "Oh good," she said, seeing the slope was not so steep after all, "I think I can climb up with no trouble at all."

She put her hands on the soft, reddish dirt, but managed to go only a few feet before the dirt crumbled beneath her and she slid down. She tried three more times, but each effort brought additional sliding.

"This is impossible," she said despairingly. "There must be an easier way to the top."

She stood up and tried to see around the embankment. From where she stood, she could not see an end to it in either direction. She took a few steps back, hoping this would help, and stepped on the cover of the book that had fallen beside her.

Crunch.

She looked down and saw a now much dirtied cover on a very muddy book. "Oh, this is great. This is really great. They're gonna fine me for sure now. If I ever get back to return it at all."

She picked it up and stared at it. The picture of the compass appeared not to have been damaged. She held it up to her face. "Hmm. It might still be usable to show me the way north. Then I can find the way back north to the clearing, come back south from there, and find where my brothers and sisters went."

WHOOOOOSH!

"What?" She lifted her head to see where the noise had come from, and, to her deepest fear (if it could be thought of as her deepest fear, considering it had never happened to her before) the embankment—had disappeared.

"What?" she sputtered.

The entire dusty slope had vanished. There was nothing but gently rolling land covered with green grass, stretching far into the distance.

"Wait a minute...what's going on? Embankments just don't get up and walk away. It must be an optical illusion." She rubbed her eyes and opened them. Nothing. Rubbed them and opened. Nothing. Rubbed and opened. Rubbed and opened. Rubbed and opened. Again, nothing, nothing, and, furthermore, nothing.

"This...this can't be," she said.

She reached out to feel for the now very invisible dirt, but as much as she stretched and strained, she felt nothing.

"It's here. It has to be," she said.

She wandered here and there all over the place with her hands out, moving them this way and that.

Again nothing.

"This is horrible." She looked at the fairy picture book. "Maybe this will tell me how to find the embankment again." She opened the fairy picture book and stopped. She flipped a page and paused. "Huh?" She flipped another page, and another, and another. Every page was blank. "No! What kind of library book is this?"

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

She turned.

Two giant hogs with razor-sharp tusks and military helmets stared at her.

"Oh," she gasped. (Where had these pigs come from?)

"Morning," a small pig said, stepping between the two soldiers.

Becky stared at the small pig, not at all surprised that he could speak...not after all she had experienced that morning. "Hello," she said.

"You've dropped by early, I see," the small pig said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Aren't you our new queen?"

"What?"

"She's due to arrive today. I thought you might be she." The small pig drew closer. "We're here to escort her back to our pigpen."

"Do I look like a pig?" Becky said indignantly.

"Does it matter?" The small pig turned around and around and Becky followed it with her eyes. "Look at my skin. Do you think it has a lovely pink color to it?"

What was this small pig getting at? "Well...uh..." Becky said.

The guards grunted in obvious approval.

"Go ahead, you can say it. Don't be shy," the small pig said.

"Um, uh, it's...beautiful?" Becky said.

"That's right, it is, isn't it?" The small pig continued to spin. "Queens know true beauty when they see it."

"That may be, but I'm not your queen," Becky said.

"You might be. Do you know how to cook?" The small pig stopped spinning and staggered. "Oh...I'm dizzy."

"Excuse me," Becky said. "But I need to go."

"So soon?" The small pig moved its head back and forth. "You sure you don't want to be our queen until the real one arrives?"

"No, thank you." (Becky said, "Thank you," to be polite, although she was disgusted by the very idea of it all.)

"You won't have to rule over us for long. Our queen is traveling on the same path you fell off of, you know. She probably was not too far behind you and should be dropping by any minute now."

"And how will she manage to do that?" Becky said. "The trail seems to have vanished."

"Oh, she's not near the drop-off point, yet. Once she gets closer, the path will reappear."

"I don't understand," Becky said. "Where's the trail now?"

"No one's using it."

"Yes?"

"No sense having paths if no one is on them, you know. Saves space."

"Uh..."

"The only time a path exists around here is when you're walking on it. It disappears once it thinks it can without you falling into thin air."

"I...uh...see."

"The trail you were on must have thought you no longer needed it, so it disappeared."

"So that's the reason I can't find it," Becky said. "But I want to be on it again. How do I do that?"

"You must wait for the arrival of our queen," the small pig said. "And then the trail will appear and you can get back on it."

"I hope it won't be too long," Becky said. "I need to find my brothers and sisters."

"Perhaps the queen will have seen them and will be able to tell you where they are when she arrives."

"That would be nice."

"In the meantime, instead of standing around doing nothing, why don't you take a break and graciously rule over us."

"No...thank you, I think I'll wait."

"But you may be here for several hours, and I know the queen would be quite grateful if you chose to be our sovereign in her absence."

"She would?"

"Oh yes, definitely."

"I'm sorry," Becky said. "But I don't have any experience at being a queen. And if I did, I wouldn't be using it to rule over a bunch of pigs. My brothers and sisters would eventually find out and never let me live it down. I'd be known as Becky, the Pig Queen, forever and ever," she said (never mind that Matthew had already given her the title of pig princess). "So, if you don't mind, I think I'll stay here until the path returns."

"Oh," the small pig said. "So it's down to bargaining now, is it?"

"What?" Becky asked. At that moment, she heard what seemed to be squealing of thousands of very agitated pigs coming from over a rolling hill. "It sounds like fighting."

"Oh, oh," the small pig said. "My fellow mates are ripping one another to shreds. Our queen better get here soon and save our bacon."

"That's sad to hear," Becky said.

"Without someone to manage our affairs, we've fallen into a total state of anarchy," the small pig said. "Oh, what are we going to do?"

"I wish you nothing but the best," Becky replied.

"That's easy for you to say, but it is more probable that our queen will find nothing to rule when she arrives."

The noise coming from the pigpen grew louder.

The soldier pigs grunted in unison and the small pig's hair stood on end. The small pig looked at Becky with pleading eyes. "Listen, I'll make a deal with you."

"A deal?"

"Yes, if you agree to act like our ruler for a short time, I'll show you how to get back to the trail without having to wait for her Swine Majesty to show."

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"And I suppose you won't do it now, will you?"

"I must think of the good of the pigpen."

"But I'm not a pig."

"It doesn't matter," the small pig said. "The colony is expecting me to bring back a queen to rule over them. I never told them what kind of queen. The pigs in the colony respect figureheads. If you pretend to be their queen for no more than...say, an hour, I believe they will fear you and settle down. After that, I think we can survive until the real queen appears."

This offer was tempting to Becky. She wanted to get back to Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins as soon as possible and did not want to have to wait several hours for a path to reappear. But, before she agreed to be a Pig Queen, she wanted to make sure her siblings were not already nearby (and especially that they were not close enough to witness her decision...which they were not, but she did not know that). She looked this way and that. They were not in sight (no, not indeed).

"Good," she thought and turned to the small pig. "Okay, but not one hour...that's too long. I'll reign over you for ten minutes."

The small pig thought about this counteroffer the best a swine could do. "Two hours"—asking for more and not, as she had expected, less.

"Thirty minutes," Becky returned. "Take it or leave it."

The sound of fighting intensified.

The small pig snorted in rapid succession. "It's a deal...this way, please."

He turned and hurried in the direction of the fighting pigs. Becky trailed along, followed by the two soldiers. Before too long, they were on top of the hill, from which Becky could see the small pig's colony below with what seemed like a gazillion jillion pigs, all equal and each one more equal than the others, cramped in a small pig-pen. They were shoving and kicking and trying to just sit down, but another pig was always in the way.

"Well," Becky said. "It's obvious why you're fighting."

"Why?" the small pig asked.

"You're overcrowded; you need a bigger place for everyone to move around."

"Don't be ridiculous," the small pig answered. "That's not the reason. We enjoy being close to one another. We need a ruler, that's all." He moseyed on up to the pen and let out a huge grunt.

The pigs stopped their squealing and directed their attention to what the small pig was about to say.

The small pig cleared his throat and announced: "This is your new queen."

"Hurrah!" the pigs all shouted and then stood up and bowed.

Becky stared at them. "Oh, how polite you all are."

"I can't see her," one of the pigs shouted. "Lift her up on the fence."

"Yes, yes," the other pigs said. "Put her on the fence so we can all see her."

"You don't need to haul me up, I can do it myself." Becky climbed the railing and stood on a post. "There...can you see me now?"

"Ooo," a pig said. "You look awful."

"Yes," another pig said. "You're very pale."

"Well...uh..." Becky said, not knowing what else to say to such a comment.

"I can cure that," a pig said, and hit against the fence. *Wack!*

"Whoa!" Becky twirled her arms to keep her balance.

"Hit it once more," another pig said.

"Certainly." The pig struck the fence again this time so hard that Becky had no choice but to fall forward and land in several inches of gooey, black mud.

Splat!

"Oh," Becky said. "Yecch." She struggled to get up from the gooey mud and examined herself. "My clothes!" She held out her hands. "Ew! My skin! Why, I'm covered in mud from head to foot."

"Perfect," the pig said.

The other pigs gathered around her and snorted in hearty approval.

"This is totally unacceptable," Becky said. "As your new queen, I demand you fetch me some water right away."

"We don't want to," one pig said. "We want something to eat instead. None of us knows how to cook."

"What?"

"Yeah, we're hungry," another said.

"And my clothes need washing," a large pig said, holding up a very soiled garment.

"And I want some fresh dirt," a tiny pig said.

"And I'm afraid the fence is going to fall down," another pig said with a great deal of concern. "It needs to be mended."

Before Becky could answer, one pig said it wanted this and another wanted that, until all the pigs were talking at once.

Becky held up her hands. "Stop! I can't understand a single word you're saying. Please, only one request at a time."

"Requests?" the pigs said. "What requests? These aren't requests." They drew closer to Becky, pinning her against the pen.

"They...they aren't?" Becky said. "What...what are they then?"

"They're demands," the pigs said, and suddenly they had very mean faces.

~ ~ ~

And as the pigs carted poor Becky away to do pig labor, the small pig ran back up the hill to a strange creature that had paid the pixie to trick the children in the first place.

"You did well," the strange creature said to the small pig. "And to keep my end of the bargain...turn around."

The pig turned around once and stopped.

The strange creature frowned. "Well...keep going."

The small pig turned around and around and around.

And while he did, the strange creature "ooo'd" and "aaa'd":

"Oh, what a pretty little pig, yes you are, such a lovely pig with such lovely pink skin..."

"It's true," the small pig snorted in return. "It's so true, isn't it? I'm so beautiful."

He was in hog heaven.

Matthew, the Annoyed

Matthew tumbled down the *same* embankment as Becky (imagine that), and dropped bottom first onto a pile of dirt.

Plop!

He shook his head and made a “Yada-yada-yada” sound as he had learned to do from watching Saturday morning cartoons. He looked around...he had landed in a rocky crevice with a few sticks on the ground. He noticed a wee little man, not more than a few feet away, staring at him. He had a little bit of hair, large gray eyes, and a bemused smile on his wee little face.

“Hello,” the wee little man said.

“Uh, who are you?” Matthew said.

“My, what happened?” the wee little man said, ignoring Matthew’s question.

“I just fell down an embankment,” Matthew said.

WHOOOOOSH! (That’s the sound of an embankment disappearing, in case you forgot.)

“Did you? What embankment?”

Matthew turned and looked up. He did not see *anything* but blue sky. “Uh...”

“You did have quite a fall,” the wee little man said. “Where from, I don’t know, but you did. Do you have any food?”

“No.”

"I'm really hungry. I can never find anything to eat around here."

Matthew did not answer. He was too interested in getting back to his brothers and sisters (really only his big sister...the twins he could care less about). He got to his feet, observed an opening in the rocks in one corner of the rocky crevice, and pointed to it. "Do you know where that goes?"

"No."

"Maybe it will take me back to the trail."

"I don't know...I have a name, do you?"

"Matthew...it's Matthew."

"Oh," the wee little man said as he took out a toy sword and jabbed it into the air. "Take that and that and that." He swung it and hit Matthew on the leg.

Whack!

Matthew winced. "Hey! What are you doing? That hurt!"

"Do you like to play?" the wee little man said.

"Yes, but not now." Matthew started to walk toward the opening in the rocks, but stopped suddenly. "Hey, what's going on here? Where did these come from?"

"What?"

"These logs."

"They've always been there."

"But I didn't see them a second ago."

"I didn't do it."

"I didn't say you did."

"You did."

"I didn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Do this."

"I didn't do it."

Matthew hit his head with the palm of his hand.

Bonk!

"You know," he said. "We're not getting anywhere with this discussion."

"Oh," the wee little man said. "Were we going somewhere?"

"We aren't going anywhere if we don't get rid of these fallen logs."

The wee little man walked up to Matthew and put his arm around his leg. "I have a piece of advice."

"What is it?" Matthew said.

"You have a bad attitude. Get over it."

"Thanks...for nothing!" Matthew shook his leg to get the wee little man off. The wee little man's remark, however, gave Matthew an idea. He surveyed the fallen logs and snapped his fingers. "Yes, why not? I'll climb over these logs to the other side."

The wee little man moved his head back and forth, smiled and looked up into the air...really, at nothing. "You're my best friend," he said.

Matthew did not reply to this very strange wee little man. He was now too intent on scaling this stack of logs. He tried to reach the first spot where he could begin his climb but found he was too short. He turned to the wee little man. "Can you lift me up?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"Just cup your hands and I'll stand on them. I saw people do this on TV once."

"If you do that, you'll leave me, and I won't have anyone to swordfight with."

"I'll pull you up once I reach the first branch. We can play then."

"I want to battle now." The wee little man waved his tiny sword.

Matthew moved away so as not to be hit again. "Hey," he said, "if you help me climb over, maybe we can find some food together?"

"No," the wee little man said, pouting.

"Fine. Forget you!" Matthew said. "I'll figure out how to get to the first branch, myself. Besides, if you don't want anything to eat, I don't care."

"I don't care, either," the wee little man said and went back to jabbing the air with his toy weapon, but not as vigorously as before.

Matthew noticed enough wood on the ground in a corner of the rocky crevice to make a nice small pile. "Hmm..." He walked over and picked up a log not much bigger than his arm.

The wee little man watched him. "While you figure out how to go up, I'm going to sit here and count every grain of sand. When I'm finished, perhaps I'll give you some assistance."

"You do that," Matthew said. He gathered several small logs and stacked them near the blocked opening. After a half hour of hard work, and right when he picked up the last piece...the very one to help him reach the first branch...he heard a crash. He turned and saw his woodpile had collapsed. The wee little man was standing by the woodpile with a tiny log in his hand. "What happened?" he demanded.

"I didn't do it," the wee little man said.

"You did."

"It fell on its own."

"You're lying. I can see the log in your hand! Leave my woodpile alone. Why don't you go back to counting sand?"

"I finished."

"Yeah, right."

"I counted to ten."

Matthew put his pile back together again. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"I am," the wee little man said.

"Doing stuff like this to keep me here to play with you is not going to work. It's only going to make me mad."

"Oh," the wee little man said.

"I'm trying to find the Tree of Balance so I can go home," Matthew said, "and also to allow people like you to eat candy again and reenter our world."

"How exciting."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to climb these logs, find my brother and sisters, and finish my quest."

"No discussion here." The wee little man stepped aside. "Go ahead. Have fun. I'm going to jump up and down." He began to hop on one leg.

Matthew stared at him with a quizzical look. "Fine, you do that. Just don't bother me while doing it." He then started to climb the logs. After pulling himself up onto the first safe spot, he studied his next move.

"Do you know how old the world is?" the wee little man said.

"Stop talking, I'm trying to concentrate."

"A gazillion jillion years."

Matthew ignored him and climbed to the next log, grabbing a branch that jutted outward.

"A gazillion jillion," the wee little man said again.

"I heard you the first time," Matthew said. At that moment, the wood snapped in his hand, and he lost his footing. He dropped a few feet.

"I didn't do it," the wee little man said and continued to jump.

"I didn't say you did."

"You did."

"Ah, forget it," Matthew said, knowing it to be another futile conversation. He climbed again and this time stepped on a twig, but the twig cracked in two under his weight, and he fell another foot.

"I didn't do it."

"I didn't either," another wee little man said, walking out from between several large rocks. He went over to the first wee little man and started to hop up and down.

Soon, another, and another, and another wee little man walked to where the two wee little men were jumping and started to leap and hop.

"I didn't do it," one said.

"I didn't either," another said.

"Stop, you're making me tired," Matthew said.

"I didn't make you tired," they said. They jumped up and down, drawing out their swords and whacking one another and hitting the ground hard.

Pound. Pound.

"You're shaking the wood!" Matthew protested.

The wee little men paid him no attention. They shouted, "I didn't do this," and, "I didn't do that."

The logs began to tremble and turn, and then...*whoosh*...came tumbling down...to no great surprise to Matthew. He jumped on one rolling log after another so as not to be crushed. Dust and screeching filled the air, and, before he knew it...and how he managed was beyond him...he found himself to be the King of the Mountain of a pile of logs. He looked below himself to see whether he could spot the little men, but there was no sign of the wee little man and his wee little friends. He called out:

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Hello? Are you there?"

Again, silence.

He looked around. "Where did they go? They must be hiding. These falling logs must have scared them." From where he stood atop the mountain of logs, he noticed a wicker basket filled with bread sitting on a path just outside the rocky crevice. "Oh," he said. "Oh, look. I see food...you guys want some?"

Nothing.

"There's enough to feed all of you."

Again, nothing.

"I'll get it for you." He crawled down the pile of wood, looking both ways. Seeing no one around and the food lying on the path for the taking, he picked it up and heaved it over the pile, taking more thought for the wee little men than he ever had for his twin sisters.

"Here," he yelled. "You helped me over by jumping up and down...thanks."

And, without waiting to see whether the wee little men would come out of their hiding places to take the bread, he turned and ran down the path to find the others.

~ ~ ~

However, as he did, he failed to notice a note that had fallen off the basket when he threw it. A note in untidy handwriting that read:

To the Wee Little Men of the Rocky Crevice,

Keep all children who drop in on you from escaping until I arrive. In return, I will supply bread for your wee little stomachs for the rest of your lives. If not, I will eat you for lunch.

Signed...

Mary and Elizabeth, the Two Little Terrors

At the same time as Becky fell into the land where she would eventually be addressed as “Your Sow-ereign Swine-ness,” and as Matthew landed in the rocky crevice to be bothered by a wee little man, Mary and Elizabeth landed on a soft spot in a small glen surrounded by elms. Red, orange, and yellow leaves whizzed past the twins’ heads as they turned and twisted.

WHOOOOOSH! (Yep, you’re right, that’s the old disappearing-embankment sound.)

“Look what you’ve done,” Elizabeth said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“I didn’t push you,” Mary said. “We fell together.”

“I don’t know where we fell from,” Elizabeth said. “There’s nothing but trees around us. Did we fall out of the sky?”

“Jonathan?” Mary called out. “Becky? Matthew?” She paused. “Elizabeth?”

“I’m right here!” Elizabeth said.

“Oh, yeah,” Mary said.

“Hmm, they should be here,” Elizabeth said. “They were following us, weren’t they?”

They looked around.

The others were nowhere to be seen (as you've probably guessed).

At that very moment, the wind picked up.

"I'm scared," Mary said. "We're lost."

"We'll find someone to help us," Elizabeth said, getting up. "Let's go."

"What if there's no one for a long time?" Mary asked. "What will we do?"

Elizabeth took Mary's hand and squeezed hard. "I don't know, but let's hope not," she said.

The two girls crept into the woods, looking both ways for grizzly bears and mountain lions. The wind began to blow harder. They looked up and saw the tree branches swaying back and forth, back and forth.

A howling noise made the girls jump.

"It's just the wind, only the wind," they said, smiling to hide their fear.

The sound started again.

Elizabeth jumped. "Run!" she screamed, and fled, not knowing what direction she was going and having absolutely no idea where it would lead. Mary followed hard after her.

"Where are we going?" Mary called out.

"I don't know! Just run!"

They went as far as they could before they both ran out of breath.

Mary panted. "I can't go any further."

Elizabeth breathed heavily. "Neither can I."

They stopped.

"I think I'm going to faint," Elizabeth said.

"Me, too!" Mary said with her hand on her head.

TRUNK!

Elizabeth looked around. "Did you hear that?"

Mary clutched Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's eyes suddenly opened wide. "Hey! Look!"

There, in the middle of nowhere, was a large, brass-bound, red leather trunk.

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Whoa," she said. "I wonder whose it is." She looked around.

Not a soul, howled the wind.

"Maybe some pirate dropped it when he was also running away like us?" Elizabeth said.

"Maybe it's treasure? Let's see what's inside," Mary said.

"Wait!" Elizabeth said. "There might be snakes in there."

Mary lifted the lid without peeking.

Elizabeth hopped up and down. "Mary! I said there might be snakes..."

Mary put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Elizabeth, look!"

Elizabeth reluctantly peeked into the open trunk. "Wow!" she said.

There, before them, lay a wide assortment of...

"Dress-up clothes!" they screamed in unison.

"There has to be a million outfits here," Mary said.

"No, two million," Elizabeth shrieked.

"A gazillion jillion!" They both laughed.

Elizabeth pulled out a red, chiffon puff, a diamond tiara with real diamonds, several pearl necklaces, and a maroon silk dress. Mary grabbed a pair of eighteen-karat-gold bracelets, a goldenrod-colored oversized shirt, and a lovely leather maxi skirt. They put them on, laughing, pretending to have afternoon tea, and forgetting the wind. It never occurred to them that, if they did not continue moving, night would indeed fall on them and they could be torn alive by lovable wood tigers.

A pine cone fell off a tree and landed right in the middle of the box of clothes.

"Whoa!" Elizabeth said. "We could've been hurt."

Mary did not hear. She was posing. "I'm a star!" She flicked her hair back.

"Mary, we've forgotten why we're here. We don't have time to play," Elizabeth closed the trunk glumly. "We need to find the others."

Mary sighed "What do we do now? Where do we go?" She opened the trunk and gathered a few more clothes.

"Mary!" Elizabeth said.

"Oh, sorry..." Mary closed the trunk sheepishly.

Elizabeth looked around. The woods looked the same. "I think we should go this way."

And again she chose a direction with no idea where it would take them.

After several minutes, they came to a clearing.

"Look," Elizabeth said, "a house."

"An old house," Mary said.

They both studied it.

It was weather-beaten. The paint had chipped off in many places; and some of the windows were broken. A loose shutter on the second floor creaked open and banged against the aged wood.

"Er..." Mary said. "Does anyone live here?"

"We should find out," Elizabeth said. "Let's go."

"Wait! What if there are rats?" Mary said.

Elizabeth walked to the house without even checking. Mary reluctantly followed.

Both twins' hair and necklaces flapped in the wind.

As they approached the front door, Elizabeth's tiara flew off her head and back into the woods. "My crown! It's gone!"

Mary gently knocked on the door. "Knock, knock!"

Elizabeth frowned. "With all this wind, no one can hear us. We have to go in," she said.

Mary's eyes widened. "What if it's haunted?"

"It's not."

"Maybe a ghost lives here."

"I don't believe in ghosts!"

The door made a creaking sound and slowly opened as though pulled by invisible strings.

Elizabeth grabbed Mary's hand. "I know," she said. "You first."

Mary shoved Elizabeth. "No! You!"

"We'll both go in, at the same time," Elizabeth said.

Holding hands, they crept into the old house. Suddenly, the front door slammed *shut!*

"Mary!"

"Elizabeth!"

The twins held each other tightly.

"It was only the wind," Elizabeth said. "That's all."

They looked around. The house was empty except for a few pieces of furniture covered with sheets. Each corner of the room was filled with cobwebs, and a dusty staircase rose before them.

"Hello? Anyone here?" Elizabeth whispered.

Mary tried to speak, but felt her throat tighten.

"Maybe we should go upstairs?" Elizabeth said.

"Gurgle," Mary managed to get out.

The window shutters hit against the sides of the house.

The twins clutched each other harder.

"We'll go up one stair at a time...very quietly," Elizabeth said. "If a ghost lives upstairs, we don't want to wake him."

Mary agreed.

Little did they know that a ghost indeed dwelled in the house. He had waited for years for a chance to frighten someone and had given up hope that it would ever happen. But earlier that morning, a strange creature had visited him and rekindled his hopes and dreams. The creature had told him that two young girls would be coming to his house, and would he be so very kind as to scare them to death? The ghost could not believe the creature's request. He was so happy that he flew high to the ceiling and did five loops around an old chandelier.

"Of course, I will scare them to death," he promised the strange creature, and did another five loops around the old chandelier.

"See that you do, or I'll burn your house down," the strange creature said, and vanished into thin air.

Now, suddenly the ghost's dream was coming true. He could not believe it, after all these years...two young girls were creeping up the old staircase.

"I'll wait until they are at the very top," he said to himself. "Then I'll jump out and scare them."

Mary and Elizabeth walked up one stair at a time.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

The ghost wrung his hands in eager wait.

Suddenly, halfway to the top, Elizabeth lost interest in going up the stairs, and thought again of the marvelous dress-up clothes in the red trunk. She turned to her sister and remarked:

"You know, I really don't like this outfit anymore."

Mary had identical thoughts of the fabulous dress-up clothes in the red trunk and glanced down at what she was wearing. "Yes, I agree with you. These are ugly, aren't they?"

"I'm going back for some more clothes," Elizabeth said.

"I'm with you," Mary told her.

And, with that, they turned, ran out the house, and back into the woods to where the red trunk lay.

The ghost could not believe it. "What? What?"

Mary and Elizabeth grabbed handfuls of precious garments and put them on.

Elizabeth now wore a large purple hat with a long white ostrich plume, and matching white silk gloves (her only complaint was that with these gloves she wouldn't be able to suck her thumb, but she briefly thought the gloves might be a good idea to help her break her nasty habit...unfortunately, only briefly). She waved her white-gloved hand at Mary. "How beautiful do I look, darling?"

"Splendorous, darling." Mary waved back.

"Shall we?" Elizabeth extended her arm.

"Of course, darling," Mary answered.

The two girls strutted back to the old house with a newfound courage, or rather, a smugness so big that fear had no place in their hearts (see what being nicely dressed can do for you?).

The ghost had his nose pressed against a windowpane (well, actually, right through the windowpane and out the other side; he was a ghost). When he saw the twins, he floated up and down and wailed, "Yes! A second chance." He wiped pretend tears from his eyes.

Mary and Elizabeth entered the house. The wind blew. The shutters hit against the sides of the house.

"Maybe we shouldn't go upstairs?" Mary said.

The ghost shrieked, but quickly put his hand to his mouth.

"No, we have to find out if someone's up there who can help us," Elizabeth said.

The twins held each other's hands and slowly walked up the staircase.

"Anyone here?"

Nothing. (Not anything alive, that is.)

They took another step.

"Anybody home?"

Again nothing. (Scary, isn't it?)

They went up one more step.

"Uh..." Mary said. She could feel her throat tightening again.

The ghost waited. Oh, the fun he would have when he jumped out and screamed at them in a high fierce voice.

Elizabeth moved her foot. It trembled. "I'm scared," she said.

Just then Mary noticed that Elizabeth's shaking foot sported white footwear that would match her outfit to a T.

"Hey! Where did you get those shoes?"

"From the trunk. Where else?"

"Look at my *ghastly* footwear," Mary said in a pretend voice. "I want some like yours."

"I'd give you mine," Elizabeth replied in a snobby pretend voice, "but *I* certainly wouldn't be caught *dead* wearing what *you* have on, darling."

"You won't be caught dead, you'll be scared dead," the ghost murmured.

The two girls stared at each other for a second and then turned and ran back out of the house, skipping and laughing all the way.

The ghost pulled on his ghost hair. He screamed, "What? What?"

Once back at the chest, Elizabeth and Mary found the perfect shoes to match their already splendid attire.

"This time, I'm taking a purple boa," Elizabeth said, and wrapped it around her neck.

"Such lovely scarves," Mary said. "I'll pick three plus these multi-colored bead necklaces." She twirled them about.

"And this gorgeous pearl necklace," Elizabeth added.

They both giggled and chortled.

At that moment, Elizabeth spotted something at the bottom of the box. "Look! Masks like you would wear to a luxurious ball." She dug to the floor and picked up two ivory disguises with jeweled glitter made from authentic gems. She handed one to Mary, who placed it on her face.

"How do I look?" Mary said.

"Ooo," Elizabeth said. "Scary." She put hers on her head. "How about me?"

"Aaggh! Like a monster!" Mary said (but she was just kidding).

They gathered a few more garments and put them on their bodies with no concern about fashion.

"Shall we go back?" Elizabeth said, hidden beneath several pieces of clothing.

"Yes," Mary said, but she could barely be heard with all the heavy clothing she had put over her mask.

Elizabeth drew close to her sister's face. "What?" she said. "I didn't hear you."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes!"

They hurried (or rather waddled) to the house.

"Look, the wind is blowing the front door open and then closed," Mary said in muffled sounds.

Elizabeth could not hear Mary. "I see a black widow spider crawling up a house post."

"Let's hurry and get inside. I'm scared," Mary said.

"What?"

"Go inside!"

They went into the old house and started to climb the stairs.

The ghost, who had not seen them come in this time, suddenly heard the creaking of footsteps and muttered:

"What? What's that?"

He floated down the hall to the flight of stairs.

"Uh...hello? Anyone here?" Elizabeth asked through her mask, which sounded like, "Wa-wa, wa-wa?"

The ghost stopped right before he got to the head of the staircase and thought:

"Who's this? Intruders?"

Mary and Elizabeth took one more step.

At that very moment, to their utter surprise, a ghost jumped out, and screamed in a high-pitched voice:

"Who dares to walk up my stairs?"

Mary and Elizabeth held up their hands in fright and the jewelry on their bodies began to shake.

The ghost stopped screeching and stared hard at the masked, noise-making creatures before him. The twins trembled even more than before.

The ghost smiled. "Oh," he said. "Fellow spooks! I'm sorry, I thought you were children. I was going to frighten them; I didn't see you come in." He glided down to meet them. "Please accept my apologies and join me in pretending to drink tea, won't you? It's not often that fellow spooks visit here, you know." (When a ghost tries to drink something, it pours right through him; that's why they have to pretend.)

Elizabeth tried to say something, but all she could do was shake her pearl necklace. "Mmmff," she said.

"How scary," the ghost observed.

Mary rattled her beads at the same time.

"Yes, very nice," the ghost said. He floated upstairs and turned. "Please, follow me," he said.

Mary and Elizabeth walked up, quivering at each step.

"You can stop all that rattling and shaking," the ghost said. "I don't think the children will ever return." He bowed his head in sadness, but then quickly regained his composure. "But there's always another day, isn't there?" (Even though it might not be for another million years or so.)

He led the twins into a small room with a window that overlooked a village. "Here," he said, pointing to a small table. "We can pretend to sit on wooden chairs and drink tea." He hovered over a chair. On the table sat a dusty teakettle and several broken cups. "Would you mind pouring the water?" he said.

Elizabeth looked around the room and saw an old indoor well pump. "I'll get some real water," she said.

"No, this is just pretend. If you hadn't noticed, we're ghosts," the ghost reminded her.

Elizabeth ignored him, and grabbed the handle of the pump. She moved it up and down. The house began to quiver.

"Please, I don't know how you're able to hold that pump," the ghost said, "but this dwelling can't take much vibration."

"You can't have tea without water," Elizabeth murmured.

"Yes, I know, but this is only..."

Mary could not stop shaking. She grabbed the table for support and caused it to hit against the floor.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"What are you doing?" the ghost cried.

"I'm scared," Mary said, but all the spook could make out was: "Mah, mah, mah."

"What?"

Bang!

Pump!

Quiver! Shake! Tremble!

"My house...it's starting to fall to pieces!" the ghost said in horror at his beautiful house being destroyed.

Elizabeth heard the sound of water flowing through the old rusty pipes. "Listen, water's coming," she said.

Bang!

Sqkwiiii...

Bang!

Wiiiiiii...

"No! Stop it!" the ghost screamed, hovering nervously over the table.

At that instant, the wood in the wall made a loud creaking noise.

Creak!

"My house is breaking apart," the ghost shrieked.

Feeling the floor move, Mary and Elizabeth ran over to the window. They watched the rafters sway. One wallboard *popped* out of the wall, and then another and another...Plaster from the ceiling cracked and dropped.

Plop!

Thunk!

The ghost turned this way and that. "Ruined. You've destroyed my home. You fools!"

Before Mary and Elizabeth knew it, the house came crashing down and they tumbled out, holding each other as they did. When they hit the ground, their masks fell off and the ghost realized he had been duped.

“You!” he cried, and attempted to grab them, but it was to no avail. For, without a house to haunt, a ghost cannot stick around. Flashing one last look of despair and before the twins could say, “We’re sorry,” the poor spirit had no choice but to vanish without a trace.

Poof! Just like that.

And when the twins recovered from their fright, they threw off most of their heavy play clothes and hurried off to the nearby village to search for their brothers and sister, vowing never to return to that haunted house again (or what was left of it, that is).

Jonathan, the Stinkpot

Now at the same time Becky, Matthew, and the twins were tumbling down the embankment, Jonathan was tumbling this way and that down the embankment to “who-knows-where” until he fell face first into soft, foul mud.

Splat!

At his weight, half his body plunged into the green slime. He pulled his head up with a *POP* from the mud and looked around. He was surrounded by tall grass. “Becky? Matthew?”

Silence. (He too, like Becky, did not know that his brother and sisters were several miles away.)

“Mary? Elizabeth?”

Again nothing. (There wouldn’t be, would there?)

After some labor and heavy breathing, he managed to stand up. He tried to scrape the mud off his body, but it refused to be released. “Great, just great!” he said. “This is the last time I go anywhere with my brother and sisters. Tricked by a pixie, falling off a stupid path, and now, this...mud on my clothes, nothing but tall grass all around, and I can’t find the way out. Becky?”

Nothing.

“Matthew?”

Silence. (*Shhh.*)

He turned to see what he had tumbled down.

WHOOOOOSH!

Nothing but a field everywhere.

"Great, this is really great. This land is really annoying." He yelled out again, "Becky? Matthew? Mary? Elizabeth? Where are you?"

Again nothing but a gentle breeze (and a great waft of sweet scent from a nearby hyacinth).

"They were right behind me. They can't be far." He moved the vegetation out of the way. "Matthew? Becky?"

Nothing. (If only he knew.)

Suddenly, he spotted a sign not too far off, with a familiar picture on it. "What's this?" He drew near and could not believe it. There, staring back at him was none other than Matthew with glasses and a goofy smile; above his face in nice, yellow lettering were the words:

STINKPOT

He looked around. Who could have put this sign up? Upon further examination, he saw additional writing below Matthew's visage.

It's people like you who stink up the entire universe

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Whoa," he said. He turned and saw a roly-poly man (but much less so than himself) with a sharp pointed hat.

The roly-poly man stared at him with a wide grin. "Like to be our new stinkpot?"

"Uh...?"

"We can always use another one, you know."

"No, I don't."

"Too bad, you'd make a good one, you know."

"Hey," Jonathan said, ignoring his comments. "You live around here? Have you seen any children wandering around? I'm trying to find my brother and sisters. This is my brother's picture on this poster. Why is his picture here? What's going on?"

"Questions, questions. What's your name?" the roly-poly man said.

"Jonathan."

"Do you live around here?"

Jonathan gave the roly-poly man a confused, sarcastic look.

"No."

"Occupation?"

"Student."

"Weight? Height? IQ?"

"What are you talking about? I need to find my..."

"Hair color?"

Jonathan grumbled. "Brown."

"Eye color?"

"Stop asking stupid questions! Can't you see what I look like?"

The roly-poly man drew near, touched Jonathan's face. "I'd rather feel it."

"Hey! Get away from me," Jonathan said.

"Let me ask you another question," said the roly-poly man, dropping his hands. "Just who are you looking for?"

Jonathan could not believe that he was being asked again, but went ahead and answered...again, "My sisters and brother."

"And just where do you think they are?"

"I don't know, somewhere around here I guess."

"And just what do you remember they were *like* when you were with them?"

"Er," Jonathan replied. "One of them looks like the boy in this poster, or *is* the boy in this picture."

"No," the roly-poly man said. "I didn't say what they looked like, but what were they like."

"Well...er..."

"Happy? Sad? Dirty?"

"I...er..."

"No, haven't seen them," the roly-poly man said, smiling.

"You haven't?"

"Nope, good day." The roly-poly man walked off.

Jonathan ran after him. "Hey! Stop, who put up this picture? Someone must have."

"I did," the roly-poly man said.

"You did?"

"Yes, not more than a few minutes ago."

"But who made the sign?"

"Your brother did, just like you will not long from now."

"He did?" Jonathan said with an annoyed laugh. "Then you must have seen him."

"No, never."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't think you would," the roly-poly man said. "Stinkpots never do."

"I'm not a stinkpot! Now tell me..."

"Tell you what? That you're a stinkpot?"

"I'm not a..." Jonathan sighed. "Just forget it. I'll find my brother and sisters with or without your help." He walked away from the roly-poly man and continued down a narrow path (about the same time, give or take an hour or two, that Becky was meeting the annoying small pig, Matthew was picking up logs, and the twins were opening the red trunk).

"Hey! Stinkpot! King Stinkpot!" the roly-poly man yelled after him.

Jonathan paid him no attention; he looked around and shouted:

"Mary? Elizabeth? Matthew? Becky? If you can hear me..." He quit screaming. A sign behind some foliage looked familiar. "What's this? Another Matthew 'Stinkpot' sign?" He moved the grass. "What?"

There, on the sign, was none other than...

"My face!" he said. "How did it get there?" He looked around. "This is weird." He then noticed an inscription below his name.

KING STINKPOT

"What?" he said. "This is stupid. I never allowed someone to use my picture on a stupid sign."

"King Stinkpot," the strange roly-poly man with the pointed hat said, walking up to him. "You like the name? It goes with the picture."

"I'm not a stinkpot! Just leave me alone, will you?" Jonathan looked at the sign. "And take that sign down!"

"But you *are* a stinkpot," the roly-poly man said. "You're stinking up the whole place. You have to be."

"No, I'm not," Jonathan said. "And stop following me!"

He hurried off. After a short while, he saw a small village. All of the houses had sharp, pointed roofs with round black chimneys that spewed stinky yellow smoke.

"Great," he said. "Maybe I can find someone who has seen the others?" As he approached the smelly town, another sign caught his eye.

Mary and Elizabeth's faces stared back at him; on the board were the words:

Stinky Pots

"No!" he said. "Where are these signs coming from?" He looked about. Nothing (as usual). He turned back to the sign. "Well, this is not going to stay here. I'll get rid of it!" He started to pull the sign out of the ground when he heard a voice behind him:

"We have another poster with your name on it."

"Wha-?" Jonathan jumped. He turned around. The roly-poly man was standing next to him once again.

"Why are you still here?" Jonathan said. "What's your problem?"

"The villagers are quite excited that you are a stinkpot, and a big one at that," the roly-poly man said.

"I'm not a stinkpot."

"Are these girls some of your friends? If they are, we haven't seen them."

"We? You mean the villagers?"

"Yes."

"And who made this sign? Who put it up? Why is it *still* up?" Jonathan pulled on the sign, but the sign would not budge.

"We put the sign up, of course," said the roly-poly man.

"Then how could you not have seen these girls, since you've obviously put their faces all over this sign?" Jonathan said, still pulling on the sign. "You aren't making any sense."

"Not so fast, cowboy," the roly-poly man said. "Mugs come and go, but stinkpots arrive and park."

"What?" Jonathan let go of the sign.

"Once a stinkpot, always a stinkpot," said the roly-poly man.

"Forget this," said Jonathan.

"If you come to our country and raise a stink...no matter where you are...your face will immediately be registered in our office of public stinkpot signs."

"Raise a stink?"

"Yes. You don't know it yet, but you've caused a huge stench for miles around."

"No, I haven't."

"Raise the big stink!"

Jonathan watched as a huge poster with his picture on it lifted from the ground. The sign read: "*The Biggest Stinkpot of Them All!*"

"Hey!" Jonathan said.

"See how big of a stink you've raised? All hail King Stinkpot!"

At that moment, Jonathan heard a crash (which sounded suspiciously like a pile of logs).

The roly-poly man jumped back. "What was that?"

"You're asking me?" Jonathan replied.

A young boy came running toward Stinkpot Village.

"Matthew!" Jonathan said. He heard a second crash (which sounded very much like a haunted house falling down), and out-of-

the-blue, he saw two little girls running behind Matthew. "Elizabeth! Mary!" he yelled, and ran after them.

(Soon, everybody was running. It was a good time to run. Fun times. Fun running times.)

"Jonathan, Matthew!" Mary and Elizabeth said. "We saw a ghost."

"And I was the King of the Mountain of a bunch of logs," Matthew said.

"And I am the biggest stinkpot of them all," Jonathan said.

All of a sudden, there was a popping sound and three small signs sprang up.

Boing!

Whoosh!

Spring!

The signs read: "Matthew, Stinkpot of the Day," "Mary and Elizabeth, Greetings, Twin Stinkpots," and "Jonathan...Stinkpot of the World Standing with His Brother and Sisters." Jonathan's, Matthew's, and the twins' photographs were on each sign showing them running and greeting each other.

Matthew shook his head. "This place stinks," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"I agree," Jonathan said. "Follow me, let's find Becky."

The children nodded, and Jonathan gave one final kick to a nearby stinkpot sign.

Kick!

The children then hurried down a path, ignoring little stinkpot signs appearing out of nowhere.

Sproing! Whoosh! Pop!

The strange roly-poly man waved and said, "Good-bye. Thank you for stinking up our day." Then he vanished in a puff of bluish-green stinkpot smoke.

~ ~ ~

And, if the children had waited a second longer, they would have seen another sign pop up. One with the picture of a strange creature they soon would encounter—from whom there would be no escape, if they were captured.

Rescuing Miss Becky Boo

Jonathan led Matthew and the twins...skipping, hopping, and singing...out of Stinkpot Village, totally unaware that a strange creature was seeking to do them harm. Totally forgetting that goblins might be searching for them to capture them, and totally forgetting that he had said to his siblings, "Let's find Becky," he was now totally focused on one goal:

"Man, I'm hungry, let's find something to eat," he said.

"Don't you think we should find Becky, first?" Matthew said.

"Um, Becky?" Jonathan thought about this for a while. "Oh, yeah, that's a good idea!"

Matthew shook his head in disbelief.

And so the children went off to search for Becky (or Miss Becky Boo, as her friends called her).

~ ~ ~

It was after they had wandered aimlessly over the countryside for two hours that Matthew said:

"I wonder where Becky landed." (He might have asked that question *before* they had wandered aimlessly over the countryside for two hours.)

"I don't know," Jonathan replied. "But we found each other, we'll find her."

"What if she fell on a rock and broke her neck?" Elizabeth said (with her thumb in her mouth).

"Broke her neck?" Jonathan said.

"It could've happened, you know," Elizabeth said (still with her thumb in her mouth).

"Yes, but..."

"Look!" Mary said. "A stream of water and plenty of fish."

"We'll ask them," Elizabeth said, sucking away.

"Er..." Jonathan said.

"Uh...asking fish?" Matthew said.

The twins ran to the water, ignoring their brothers. "Yoo-hoo. Any of you fish talk? Can you tell us if you saw a dead girl? Her name's Becky."

They waited for the answer. Jonathan hurried up behind them. "We don't know if Becky crashed to a rocky grave or not."

"Look at that large fish staring at us," Elizabeth pointed out. "It looks like it wants to tell us something."

"Twins, don't be foolish. Fish can't talk," Matthew said, wanting to believe that if anything was normal in the bizarre land, it was that fish definitely, absolutely, no way could talk.

"Let me do the asking," Jonathan said.

Matthew's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Hello," Jonathan said, and waved.

The fish put its head out of the water and moved one fin up and down. "Hello."

Matthew's mouth dropped further open (much as it had when he saw the Tree of Balance).

"Mind if I ask you a question?" Jonathan said.

"No," said the fish.

"Have you seen a little girl with long, curly brown hair?"

"Only pigs."

"Pigs?"

"Dirty swine came by here not long ago; one of them was washing clothes."

"Doing laundry?" Jonathan said. "Is that possible for a pig to do?"

"This pig had arms," the fish said, and then went back under water to breathe.

Jonathan stared. "Arms?" He thought of this only for a second and then snapped his fingers. "Becky! It has to be Becky! The fish must not know what a pig looks like."

The twins giggled at the thought of Becky looking like a pig.

Jonathan waited for the fish to return, but suddenly, Matthew said, in a voice loud enough for everyone and their grandmother to hear (except theirs, of course, since she lived about fifteen hundred miles away in a condo by the beach):

"This is a great place to fish! Let's come back here someday and catch a dozen talking fish and sell them to a circus."

All the talking fish made a multitude of flipping and swishing water noises and vanished.

Jonathan frowned. "Matthew!"

"What?"

"Listen," Mary said. "I think I hear some pigs now...across the stream."

Everyone became quiet. Sure enough, not far away, the sound of snorts and grunts could plainly be heard.

"You think Becky is there?" Mary asked.

"Why not. She looks like a pig," Matthew said.

Jonathan agreed heartily (not that he should talk).

The twins giggled some more.

They hurried down the shore looking for a place to cross.

"The pigs sound like they're leaving," Mary said. "We need to hurry."

Jonathan noticed the pigs' squealing growing faint. He felt the ground tremble and then watched the river becoming wider and wider.

"Wait," he said. "The ground is moving. The pigs aren't going anywhere. We are!"

"But where?" Matthew said.

"I don't know," Jonathan said. "But the river is too wide now to cross by foot. We need to find a boat to get to the other side."

"And where do we get one?" Matthew asked. "Stinkpot Village?"

"No." Jonathan shuddered. "I refuse to go back there for anything."

"Maybe that stinkpot can help us?" Elizabeth suggested.

"Who?"

"There," Elizabeth said, pointing.

Everyone looked. A very ugly old woman sat beside the shore of the river with the biggest scowl any of the children had ever seen.

"That's not a stinkpot," Jonathan said (not seeing any stinkpot signs next to her). "That's just a...uh, a very ugly old woman."

"Whoa, where did she come from?" Matthew said. "She wasn't there when I last looked."

"I don't know," Jonathan answered. "But I'm glad she is. Maybe she knows where we can find a boat to take us across."

As they approached the ugly old woman, Jonathan noticed near her feet a pile of lettuce on the ground that appeared to be in a progressive state of wilting. She smiled at them with yellowed teeth (a reminder to always brush your teeth after every meal).

"Hello," Jonathan said.

"Hello," the ugly old woman answered back. "Buy some fresh vegetables?"

"Er...no thanks," Jonathan said.

"Buy something from me, and I'll give you three wishes."

The twins' eyes lit up at the thought of three wishes.

"I'm afraid we've only come to ask if you know where we could find a boat to carry us across this river," Jonathan said.

"You don't believe me, that I can give you three wishes?" the ugly old woman asked.

"No, I didn't..."

"I have money," Elizabeth said. She took a gold coin out of a silk purse she had taken from the red trunk in the forest, and handed it to the ugly old woman. "Take this, but keep your...uh...fresh vegetables." She whispered to Mary, "I don't like vegetables."

Mary nodded in hearty, identical agreement.

"Bless you," the ugly old woman said. "And now, you have three wishes."

"Wish that you'll stop sucking your thumb," Matthew said.

"No!"

"You're almost eight years old; when are you going to stop?"

"Here, let me make the first wish," Jonathan said, shoving Elizabeth and Matthew aside. "I wish for a boat."

"Hey!" Elizabeth stomped her foot. "The wishes are mine."

The ugly old woman reached into her black cloak, pulled out a toy ship and gave it to Jonathan who took it with the following protest:

"This...this won't get us across."

"You don't want it?"

"No."

"Okay." The ugly old woman took the toy boat from Jonathan, put it back into her black cloak, and rubbed her hands. "That was your second wish, you now have one left."

"Hey!" Elizabeth said loudly and stomped her foot again (if only she had a fiddle for some foot-stomping music...yee-haw!).

"Give me a gold coin," Matthew said to Elizabeth. "So we can get more wishes in case we mess up again."

"Sorry, only one set of three wishes per traveling band," the ugly old woman said.

"That's not fair," Elizabeth said.

"Listen up everyone," Jonathan said, gathering them together in a huddle. "If we wish for money, we can find someone to take us across or even sell us a boat."

Everyone agreed it was a good idea.

Jonathan turned back to the ugly old woman.

"Can I make the last wish?" Elizabeth asked.

"No," Jonathan said, and then, "For our last wish, we want..."

Elizabeth pouted and stuck her thumb back in her mouth.

"Why not wish for more wishes?" Mary said.

Jonathan ignored her. "For our last wish, we want..."

"A gazillion jillion dollars," Matthew whispered.

"A gazillion jillion dollars," Jonathan said.

"Oh my," the ugly old woman said. "Are you sure you want that much? That's a lot of money."

"Yeah," Jonathan said, staring at her. "I thought so. You can't give it to us, can you? You just made up that nonsense about, 'I'll give you three wishes, to make us buy something, didn't you?'"

"No," the ugly old woman said. "On the contrary, I don't think you can carry it all."

"I think we can," Jonathan said. "Give me!"

"Well, if you insist," the ugly old woman said. "In this land, we have a different form of currency that you're probably not used to...a grain of sand is equal to one dollar."

"What?"

"Hold out your hands." The ugly old woman picked up some sand near her and held it out for Jonathan to take. "I'd say this is about...oh...I don't know...maybe a thousand or two...probably more...but it doesn't matter, does it? Not with a gazillion jillion dollars."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Jonathan said.

The ugly old woman appeared to pay him the least of attention as she scooped up handful after handful of sand and poured it at his feet.

Jonathan turned to Matthew and the twins. "Let's get out of here; she's mad."

Elizabeth hit Jonathan. "No, you're just dumb."

"Hey!" Jonathan said.

"Not so fast," the ugly old woman said. "Look where your money is going?"

As they watched, the river appeared to take on another shape. At first, it was subtle, but soon quite noticeable. For instead of a blue color, the water took on a brown hue and then...

"It's nothing but sand," Matthew pointed out.

"You get what you wish for," the ugly old woman said and then vanished.

"Uh...hello?" Matthew said. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said, "but at least she didn't explode." (Why he said that, he did not know, but he felt like someone *could* explode in this bizarre land if they so wanted.)

"This place scares me," Elizabeth said. "Let's hurry and find Becky."

"Follow me," Jonathan said. He led the others across what had been a river a few minutes earlier and up a grassy hill on the opposite side. He picked up the faint sound of squealing. "It's coming from over that hill, c'mon."

Before long, they could see a very crowded pigpen.

Elizabeth pointed with a wet thumb:

"Look at all the pigs."

"There's so many," Matthew said. "I hope we can spot Becky."

"She shouldn't be hard to find," Jonathan said (he didn't really think she looked that much like a pig).

"Unless she's somehow been magically transformed into a pig herself," Matthew said.

"I hope not," Mary said.

"But if she is," Matthew said, hoping she was, "we can ride her around the block."

The twins cheered.

At that moment, a big sow, who was crushed against the pen's fence by her fellow mates, grunted at the children:

"Hey, kids. Have you ever seen such magnificent pigs before?"

"Not fat and ugly ones like you," Matthew said, trying to be funny.

The big sow did not laugh.

"That one isn't big." Mary pointed to a thin pig wearing a crown and feeding slop to the others.

"Did that pig talk?" Elizabeth said (but no one heard, or they had an excuse not to hear her, because of the loud squeals).

Jonathan stared, and then, in a moment of recognition shouted:

"That's not a pig! It's Becky! Becky? Becky?"

"She can't hear us because of all the squeals," Matthew said.

"Becky!" Jonathan yelled.

"Er...you're giving me a headache," the big sow said. "Please take your loud antics elsewhere."

"We're not going without our sister," Matthew said. "And that's her over there with the crown on her head."

"Our queen?" the big sow said.

"Becky! Over here!" Jonathan jumped up and down and flapped his arms.

The big sow began to grunt and snort.

Suddenly, a multitude of soldiers, pigs, and piglets ran over to where the children were standing (or rather, being so crowded, they pushed their bodies over to where they were).

"They want to steal our beautiful queen," the big sow said.

"Our beautiful monarch?"

"Uh...beautiful?" Matthew said.

The pigs arched their backs, opened their mouths and showed their very pointed teeth...some with razor-sharp tusks.

The children trembled.

"Er..." Jonathan said. "I think we should back up slowly."

"Yes, good idea," Matthew said, and took one step backward.

Jonathan and the twins sprinted off.

Matthew backed up a few more steps, turned and saw Jonathan and the twins running in the distance. "Hey! Wait up!"

The pigs watched the children flee and then relaxed their defensive posture.

Matthew regrouped with Jonathan and the twins within sight of the pigpen.

"Great, what do we do now?" Matthew said, panting.

"Maybe they'll let her go if we give them something?" Mary said.

"A nice present, perhaps?" Elizabeth said.

"Silly girls, what kind of gift? We don't have anything to offer, unless they like sand." Matthew thought of the river.

"We have some jewelry we took from a red trunk in the woods," Elizabeth said. She opened her jacket and showed them her necklaces.

Jonathan stared hard at what she had on. "Yes," he said. "That's it."

"What?"

"Give me your pearl necklace."

"No! I love my necklace!" Elizabeth said, clutching her pearl necklace for dear life.

"Give it!" Jonathan said.

Elizabeth reluctantly took it off and handed it to him.

"Do pigs even like pearls?" Matthew said.

"No, they hate them," Jonathan whispered. "If you throw pearls at pigs, they'll turn and rip you to pieces (or so his Sunday school teacher had taught him). So here's the plan...You creep behind that hill and come from behind. I'll throw the pearls in front of the swine and then run like crazy. When the pigs leave to chase me, you go up to the pen and rescue Becky."

"I don't think this is going to work," Matthew said. "You're thinking of a myth (he vaguely remembered hearing about this in one of his Sunday school lessons...the day he was filling in all the "O's" in his lesson sheet). And you'd be caught in the first few seconds, if you didn't know. You aren't that fast."

"Listen, today we've seen a jeweled tree disappear, heard goblins, been deceived by a pixie, and got a gazillion jillion dollars in sand!...*anything* is possible." Jonathan paused. "And I can too run fast! Let's go." Jonathan watched Matthew and the twins run over the hill. He then walked to within twenty feet of the pigpen and bravely shouted (and you must understand that this was indeed brave for Jonathan, for he would normally cower and run...but, for the sake of his older sister, a noble cause, it was time to rumble!):

"Oh, piggies. Suie, Suieeee, here piggy, piggy."

All the pigs stopped their grunting and looked at Jonathan.

"I have a gift for you," Jonathan said with his hands behind his back. He held up the pearl necklace and waved it back and forth.

The pigs' eyes glowed red. They drew near the fence, shoving, struggling, and squealing.

Jonathan broke the necklace's string and let the pearls drop in his hand. He then showed the pigs what he had. "Want some?"

The pigs' eyes opened wide and their hair stood on end.

"Here. Catch!" Jonathan cast the pearls before them.

At that instant, the weight of the pigs tore down the fence and out they came...all ten thousand of them.

"Get him!" they shouted.

Jonathan turned and ran with all his might.

The pigs stampeded, falling over one another, getting back up and falling down again. "He's getting away. Faster!" they squealed.

Jonathan heaved and wheezed over the hilltop and down to a stream that gently flowed (or *now* rather trickled) into the river (merrily) turning to sand downstream (merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is

but a...*dune*?). "I'm too fat," he thought. "I'll never make it." He ran another twenty feet, and then clutched his side. "Ah! A cramp!"

Before the piglets could close in on his ankles and bite them off, a mysterious young man caught up with him.

"This way," he said.

"What? Who are you? Where did you come from?" Jonathan said.

"Roll," the young man said.

"Roll?"

The young man pushed Jonathan so that he fell forward. The young man dropped and tumbled down the hill with Jonathan.

The pigs tried to move faster. Some of them jumped, some tripped over their feet and went head over heels, some stood up and tried to run, but fell over on their backs, kicking their legs and squealing like stuck pigs.

Meanwhile, Mary, Elizabeth, and Matthew, on seeing that all the pigs had followed Jonathan over the hill to tear him to pieces, ran over to the pigpen.

Becky stood with a bucket of slop in her hands. "May I have your order, please?"

"Snap out of it, Becky," Matthew said. "Follow us. We're here to rescue you."

"Oh, Becky, we thought you were dead," Elizabeth said and hugged her, getting mud all over her clothes.

Matthew grabbed Elizabeth. "We don't have time for this; we need to hurry before the pigs get back."

Jonathan and the young man tumbled into the stream before the pigs could catch them.

When the pigs saw this, they made all sorts of noises. "We can't swim. Get out. We want to eat you."

Jonathan stood up in the stream. "I think you should worry more about something happening to your precious queen than about

eating me.” He laughed, and then stopped. “Uh-oh, did I just blow Matthew’s cover?”

“Our queen?” The pigs turned their heads this way and that, looking at one another, until finally they realized that something wasn’t kosher (ask your parents) about this whole affair. “NO!!!” They spiral-tailed it back up the hill, grunting and snorting and again making a huge racket.

Jonathan saw Matthew, the twins, and Becky coming around the hill toward the stream. He waved to them. “Jump in, before the pigs find out and come back.”

At that moment, he heard what sounded like cries of anguish, wailing and gnashing of pig teeth coming from the pigpen. His face immediately took on an all-knowing expression, and he scratched his head, his brown hair now scraggly with the mud.

“Er...” he said. “I don’t think this is a place we’ll be coming back to any time soon.”

A Dwarf's Sword

"I'm glad you rescued me," Becky said, washing the mud off her body and clothes. "I thought I would be the pigs' slave forever. They were very rude creatures."

"We thought you were dead," Mary said.

"That you had fallen on a rock and broken your neck," Elizabeth added.

"Really?" Becky said.

"We didn't know where to find you," Jonathan said, "but we met a talking fish who told us he had seen a pig washing clothes. We thought it might be you and we were right."

"Yeah, since you look like a pig," Matthew said, as he patted her on the back with a big smile.

Becky glared at him.

"We saved you with pearls," Jonathan said. "Pigs hate them. I pulled them off a necklace in front of the pen while Matthew, Elizabeth, and Mary went behind a hill. When the swine saw the pearls, they came stampeding out. I would have been crushed by all the hogs if it hadn't been for a young man who came running to my side and..." His voice faded away.

Becky stared at him. "A young man?" She looked around. "Where?"

"I...er..." Jonathan looked around quizzically. "I don't know. He fell into the stream with me."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said, still looking around.

"Maybe he was an angel?" Elizabeth suggested (and why, no one ever knew).

"Maybe a ghost?" Mary said.

The twins shrieked and clutched each other.

At that moment, the children heard the disgruntled grunting of the pigs in the distance.

"C'mon," Becky said. "Let's go over this hill to the other side before the pigs return."

"Good idea," Jonathan said.

Together, they climbed to the peak. At the summit, Becky stopped to catch her breath. She turned around to see if any of the pigs were searching for her near the stream. Instead, she watched as the stream filled with sand (*merrily, merrily...*). "What's this? Where's all that sand coming from?"

"What?" Jonathan said, looking. "Oh...er...that. I wished for it."

"You did?"

"Yes, we met this ugly old woman who granted us three wishes."

"And wanted us to buy vegetables," Matthew said.

The twins made gagging noises.

"Interesting," Becky said. "And you wished for sand?"

"No, we wished for money to buy a boat to cross the river this stream flows into," Jonathan said. "But the ugly old woman gave us sand instead of money because she said they used sand as money in this land."

"And how much did you ask for?" Becky watched the sand (*mer-rily*) overflowing the stream's banks and burying the countryside.

"Oh...er," Jonathan said. "Er...a gazillion jillion dollars."

"What?" Becky said in shock.

"Look," Matthew said. "The pigs have returned. They're heading for the stream."

"Oh," Becky said with considerable alarm. "With all that sand they'll be able to cross over. Quick. Let's go to the other side and find a place to hide."

As they hurried across the top, Becky noticed what at first appeared to be small stones on the peak growing bigger and bigger until they became a high pile of twisted, razor-sharp black rocks that appeared to span the entire summit. She gasped. "Oh no. How are we going to climb over? We'll cut ourselves."

"And we can't go around," Matthew said. "The pigs will be here before we're able."

They could hear the sound of angry swine in the distance. The children looked at one another.

"We don't have much time to think," Becky said.

"We're doomed," the twins started screaming with Jonathan joining in. They ran around, and flapped their arms like a chicken with its head cut off.

"Wait," Matthew said. "I see something." He ran to a particular spot in the formation. "Yes. Look...a tunnel going into the formation. We can climb in and hide."

At the magic word, "hide," Jonathan and the twins stopped screaming and huddled over.

"We'll slice ourselves," Becky said.

"The rocks here are smooth."

Becky ran over and examined the entrance. "Yes," she said. "You're correct." She turned to the others. "I don't know where this leads, but if we stand out here, the pigs will tear us to pieces."

"What are we waiting for?" Jonathan said. "Let's hurry and get inside."

Becky scrambled into the hole with the others squeezing in behind her. They followed the tunnel to an empty room, where they crawled out, one at a time, and stood up.

Becky looked around in awe. "What is this place?"

"It looks like a large rock chamber of some kind," Jonathan said and heard his voice back in an echo. "Of some kind...of some kind..."

The sound of the pigs grew louder outside and also caused an echo, "Squeal, snort, squeal...squeal, snort, squeal..."

"Are we safe from the pigs in here?" Elizabeth said obviously frightened.

"Yes," Becky said. "They're too fat to fit through the opening to the tunnel."

"They may be fat," Matthew said, rubbing his arm (he was rubbing it because Becky hit it when she found out he was shaking his head and mouthing "No" when Becky was telling Elizabeth the pigs were too fat to fit through the opening). "But I bet once the pigs have figured out that we're in here, they're so stubborn that they won't leave until we come out. We'll starve..."

"No food?" Jonathan said in panic.

"We'll need to find another way out, then." Becky stared at the walls for any sign of another exit. After a bit, she noticed a dark spot across the room about three feet from the floor. "Hmm."

"What?" Jonathan said, eager and sweating.

"Yes, I think I've found another passageway." Becky walked to the wall opposite her and peered in. "Yes, it *is*...it's a tunnel, and..." She smiled and exclaimed. "There's a blue light at the end of it!"

"A blue light?" asked Matthew. "You think it's showing us the way out?"

"I don't know, but there's only one way to find out. C'mon."

Together, they climbed into the passageway and followed it until they came to another chamber whose floor was lined in blue rock crystals. Each rock crystal was one to six feet tall and emitted a faint bluish glow.

"So this is where the blue light was coming from," Becky said disappointedly.

"It's not very bright," Matthew said.

"It's enough to find another tunnel," Becky said, not giving up. She hopped down, took a step forward, and tripped over a small rock crystal. "Oh!"

"Becky!" Matthew said.

"I'm all right," Becky said, getting to her feet. Suddenly, she froze. "Uh..."

"What's the matter?" Matthew said.

"Shh." Becky peered into the dim light. She had seen something moving in the corner of the room. After her eyes had adjusted to the pale blue light, she was able to make out a dwarf with a large nose and scraggly beard, wearing rags from head to foot. He struck something with a tool in his hand.

Clank.

At the noise, Matthew crawled down and poked her. "What is it? A pig?"

"A pig?" Becky said (wondering why Matthew would ask her such a question when there was not a single snort or squeal to be heard...only a clanking sound). "No, it's a dwarf."

"A dwarf?"

"Shh, he's doing something, but I can't make out what."

"Digging for jewels?"

"Not pearls, I hope," Jonathan said, eyeing the previous room where the faint sound of squealing could still be heard.

"No." Becky peered even harder. "More like..."

Clink. Clank.

"Like striking a piece of metal."

"What for?"

"I don't know, I can't see. Perhaps if I creep closer." She inched forward.

"Why bother?" the dwarf blurted out.

"Oh," Becky said, and tripped over another rock crystal in surprise.

"Don't go sneaking around," the dwarf said. "I won't bite. I know all about you. Don't be afraid. Draw near, and be careful that you don't trip on any more rock crystals. They're very fragile, and I need their light."

He remained intent on his project.

Clink.

He struck what Becky could now see to be a hammer against a metallic piece he held with one hand.

Clank!

Colorful blue sparks flashed in the dim light.

The children approached him all wide-eyed.

"There," he said. "That should do it." He held up a shiny silver object. "Like it?"

Becky blinked. "What is it? A sword?"

"Yes...you'll need it to defend yourself against the gelfelchin."

"What?" Becky said.

"To defend yourself against the gelfelchin," the dwarf said. "A mixed-up creature, part fairy, part human, part witch, part whatever."

"Part stinkpot," Jonathan whispered.

Matthew and the twins nodded (albeit in a shocked state).

"But...uh..." Becky's eyes grew wide. "I don't..."

"You don't know how to use it? Watch." The dwarf swung the sword against the side of the cave.

Screeeeeeee!

Small rocks and pebbles shot off in all directions. (If you don't believe it, look up the word *scree* if you have a large dictionary handy.)

The children ducked.

"See how effective it is?" the dwarf said. "You don't need to be an expert sword-fighter to wield it."

"Yes, I can see that," Becky said. "But..."

"It'll do the trick. Be careful when you carry it," the dwarf said. He pulled the blade close to his face and acted as if he were running his fingers across the tip. "Extremely sharp, as you can tell."

"Yes," Becky said. "I believe you, but..."

"But what?"

"But I don't understand why we have to defend ourselves against this creature called the gelfelchin."

"You don't?" the dwarf asked. He stared at Becky from beneath bushy gray eyebrows.

Becky gave him a blank look.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the dwarf said, "I thought you had seen some of the gelfelchin's most-wanted posters?"

"Most-wanted posters?"

"Yes, she's after you, you know. She has a reward out for your capture for killing the Tree of Balance."

"But we didn't kill the Tree of Balance," Becky said.

Mary shrank behind Elizabeth.

"I know that," the dwarf said. "And so does every wee folk in this land. But the gelfelchin doesn't for some odd reason, and she has promised anyone who captures you a huge reward."

"Then we're safe," Becky said. "For no one believes her."

"No," the dwarf said. "The gelfelchin has a spell over the goblins near her forest, and they believe everything she tells them."

"Goblins?" Matthew said. "We heard two goblins this morning when we were in an underground tunnel. They were searching for us and speaking of a large reward for our capture. That must be the gelfelchin's goblins."

"Yes, most certainly they were," said the dwarf.

"Oh," Becky said. "This is horrible. Why would the gelfelchin want this? It doesn't make sense. She's trapped in this underground land like everyone else unless we bring the Tree of Balance back to its proper place. Don't you think she'd want to find out if the Tree of

Balance is alive or not before she puts out a reward for our capture?"

"You'd think," the dwarf said. "But the gelfelchin's a mixed-up creature and doesn't think well. And when she makes up her mind to go after someone for some squirrely notion, the best defense against her is a good offense." He held up the sword. "Like this."

"Oh," Becky said. "But none of us has used a sword before. We wouldn't know how to defend ourselves with it even if we wanted to."

"Don't worry," Matthew shoved Becky aside. "I know how to use it."

"You?" Becky said.

"Yes, I've had practice."

"You have?"

(He was thinking of his video games.)

"Okay then..." The dwarf took out a leather scabbard and slipped the sword inside. He handed it to Matthew. "Only in self-defense against the gelfelchin," he warned him.

Matthew nodded and took the sword while Becky stared at him in disbelief.

"Oh," she said angrily (and jealous in a way). "I hope you never use it."

"Don't worry," Matthew chanted in a false tone. "Only in self-defense. Hey, twins!" He ran after the twins, who (wisely) ran away.

"Now," the dwarf said, "let me not keep you a second longer from your journey. I'll show you the way out from here." He pointed to a ledge above their heads. "See that hole...the one with the pale light?"

"Yes, I do," Becky said, looking up.

Matthew swung the sword (in its scabbard, of course) this way and that at the twins. The twins ducked and scurried about (miraculously not falling over any blue rock crystals).

"Take that hole to the outside," the dwarf said. "You'll find a field in front of you. Cross over until you find a trail. That's the path to northern regions of our land...the one you should've been on all this time."

"What about the pigs?" Elizabeth said, panting and clutching on to Becky for sanctuary from Matthew. "What if they're outside waiting for us?"

"They're on the opposite side of this rock formation," the dwarf said. "Don't worry about them. Besides, if they come through here, I'll take care of them. I've other weapons at my disposal."

Matthew finished swinging the sword to his heart's content and came over. "What if we meet goblins in the forest? What do we do then?" he said with a big grin (hoping the dwarf would tell him to take out the sword and chop off the goblins' heads).

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about seeing any goblins unless you wander into a thick forest. They prefer dark, damp places," the dwarf said. "But in case you do see one..."

"Fight?" Matthew held up the sword.

"Hide," the dwarf replied.

(The sword drooped.)

"And the gelfelchin?" Becky said. "Will she be on the trail waiting for us?"

"No, the gelfelchin has the goblins searching for you," the dwarf said. "So as long as the goblins don't capture you to bring you to her, you really don't have to worry about her, either."

"You mean, as long as we stay on the trail, everything will be okay?" Becky asked.

"Yes," the dwarf said. "Everything will be fine."

"Oh," Becky answered (and then wondered why the dwarf had given them the sword in the first place if they would never meet the gelfelchin). "Then we'll be sure not to wander off the trail."

"Yes, that's a very good idea," the dwarf said. "Now, hurry, children. You must be quick to find the Tree of Balance and return it. The wee folk of this land are getting mighty hungry for candy."

"We'll do the best we can," Becky said. "Come, Mary." She lifted her up to the shelf. "And now you, Elizabeth."

Jonathan and Matthew climbed up after them.

"You've been very kind to give us the sword in case we need it and to show us the way out," Becky said to the dwarf. "We'll never be able to repay you."

"Yes, you can," the dwarf replied, "by having a successful journey." He helped her up by holding her foot. "I enjoy entering your world from time to time. We may meet again."

"That would be nice," Becky said. "Please stop by and have tea." But, as she said this and looked down, it came as no surprise to her the dwarf had disappeared.

Goblins in the Forest

The children crept out of the opening into a warm forest where orange, red, and yellow leaves drifted down from tall trees. The entire wooded area was ablaze with fiery colors.

"How these trees change at every turn," Becky reflected.

"Can you believe the dwarf gave us a sword?" Matthew said, not caring about the ever-changing climate, but more eager for a fight. He took the sword out and swung it around. "I can't wait to use it."

"I hope you never do," Becky said, glaring at him (as well as backing off with some concern).

"There's the field straight ahead like the dwarf told us," Jonathan said. "See it? Surrounded by that gray wooden fence?"

"Yes," Becky said. "Let's hurry and get to the path."

They scrambled off the ledge, and began to walk through a thinly wooded area before they came to the gray fence.

Jonathan looked about nervously. "You don't think there are any goblins in these woods, do you?"

Becky thought about this for a second, and then said, "No. There aren't that many trees around here. It's too bright. The dwarf said the goblins prefer dark, damp places."

"Who cares?" Matthew said with a newfound courage. "If a goblin comes around, then I'll chop off its head!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Becky said. "The dwarf said to hide, and hide we will!"

Matthew frowned.

"Why are the leaves changing colors when they were green on the other side of the hill?" Elizabeth asked (not thinking about goblins lurking about, whether in these woods or in a deep, dark forest).

"I don't know," Becky said. "This is not our world."

"It's because you suck your thumb," Matthew whispered to Elizabeth.

"Nuh-ah." Elizabeth immediately took her thumb out of her mouth.

"I know a poem," Mary said (not worrying about goblins hobgoblin about either...poor thing) and then recited in a loud voice:

When leaves fall down, fall has come around,

When flowers have sprung, spring has begun,

When you see an icicle, it's time...

For a winter pickle.

Elizabeth laughed.

"I imagine seasons in this underground land never change," Matthew said over Elizabeth's laughter. "You can be in fall in one place and winter another."

"You mean it's always fall in this part of the woods?" Jonathan said, louder than Matthew and Mary put together.

"Yes...it's possible!" Matthew screamed.

"Shh," Becky said. "What's wrong with you guys? Do you want the goblins to hear you?"

"But you said there were no..."

"Shh!"

Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins immediately shut up and did not say another word.

After a few minutes, Becky became preoccupied with the approaching field. Bright-colored butterflies flew among orange and red wild flowers. Yellow grass waved in a mild breeze. She could hear the sound of running water...possibly a creek...nearby. She let go of the twins' hands and climbed the field's fence and saw what appeared to be fireflies not far off. One flew toward her and hovered near her face for a brief moment, but long enough for her to realize it wasn't an insect but a tiny sprite. "How enchanting," she thought.

She watched several tiny sprites flying in her direction.

"Greetings," the tiny sprites said. "We know you seek the path to the north. Follow us. The meadow is large. You don't know where to go, we'll guide you."

"Thank you," Becky said.

The tiny sprites crossed the field, touching the tips of the grass. As they did, the foliage parted and formed a trail for the children to take. Wherever the tiny sprites glided, the vegetation lit up in an array of dazzling colors.

"So pretty," Becky said, following after them. "If anyone ever asks me what I liked the most about this underground land, I'll have to tell them it was times like this."

Within a few moments, the tiny sprites finished leading the children to the edge of the field and pointed to a well-worn path that followed the boundary of the field, starting from a sparsely wooded area to their right and entering a dark forest to their left.

"Here," they said. "This is the trail that leads north. Travel on it and bring back the Tree of Balance. And may your journey be successful."

"Thank you," Becky said. "You're very..." She paused. She wanted to say, "You're very kind," but the tiny sprites had already flown away. "Strange...no one in this land ever wants to be thanked."

"You should have asked them which way was north," Jonathan said.

"You're right," Becky said. She turned to see if she could spot the tiny sprites, but they had vanished. "Oh rats."

"Where's the compass?" Matthew said. "You know, the one that was drawn on the front cover of the fairy picture book."

"I forgot all about it," Becky said. She pulled out the dirty and soggy fairy picture book from her oversized pants pocket where she had placed it before going to the pigpen. The drawing of the compass was smeared. The arrow remained motionless. She frowned as she held it to her face. "Yecch. It's quite unusable now."

"Why don't you open it and see if it'll tell us the way north?" Matthew said.

"I don't think so," Becky said. "It's nothing but blank pages."

"Blank pages?"

"That's not a very good library book," Jonathan said, knowing he would never check out such a stupid book.

Everyone agreed.

At that moment, a cool breeze blew several colorful leaves past the children. Becky watched the leaves chase one another down the trail into woods that had a few trees and a multitude of wild flowers carpeting its ground.

"I have an idea," she said, pointing in the direction of the tumbling leaves. "Why don't we go that way, and take a chance that it might be heading north."

"No," Jonathan said. "Didn't you feel that wind? It was cold. It had to come from the north. We should go in the direction it blew from. That way." He pointed to where the trail entered the dark forest, overgrown with a canopy of wild vines. (Was this boy crazy?)

Becky looked. "Uh..."

"And," Jonathan said. "If it's not the way to the north of this land, the worst that will happen to us is that we'll end up back where we started...where we were tricked by the pixie. In that case, we'll know to turn around and come back here and go the other way." (Yeah, sure.)

"Good idea," Matthew said.

"Um...uh," Becky said, dazed and confused at the cluelessness of her siblings.

The boys started down the path toward the dark woods. Becky stood still, and watched the twins follow after them. She had not noticed the air that had blown the leaves past them was cool. She looked at the section of woods that had good visibility. She really wanted to take the trail through this part of the forest where she could see more than a few feet in either direction. What if a goblin was hiding behind a tree in the dark forest waiting to pounce on them? How would she see them with all the vines? Suddenly, she heard a loud *rustling* sound coming from the lightly wooded area (probably a twenty-foot squirrel, nothing to worry about).

"Uh..." She turned and shouted to her siblings: "Wait up!"

In fewer than three seconds, she had caught up with them.

~ ~ ~

After traveling a short distance, Becky noticed the forest was becoming even more dark and damp on either side of the trail. She pulled the twins close to her. "Let's stay near one another," she told the others. "I don't want anyone wandering off the path and becoming lost in the woods."

"Good idea," they all said.

After ten more feet, Matthew suddenly said: "What's that?"

"What?" Becky said.

"That sheet of paper on that tree over there, I see our pictures."

"I see it too," Jonathan said and then looked around. "Is that weird man from Stinkpot Village nearby? Is he putting up signs telling everyone that we're stinkpots? Because if he is..." He pounded his fist into his hand.

They walked to a large, ominous tree with dark branches, and stared at a poster nailed to its trunk. On it were drawn their faces with tiny cartoon bodies. Each one of them held an ax. At their feet,

the Tree of Balance lay chopped in tiny bits. Beneath this...in rather sloppy handwriting (something that Becky seemed to remember seeing before in the not-so-distant past, but certainly not her own handwriting)...were the words:

Wanted: Dead or Alive

Mortal Children

One Million Gems on Delivery

And in even smaller, almost illegible writing, Becky read aloud:

Heads on silver platters preferred, but not required (brass trays accepted)

"Oh," she said. "Do you see what the gelfelchin has put up? She wants our heads! This is horrible. This is not right. This is bad."

"Don't worry," Matthew said in a brave voice, and grabbed the handle of the sword in the leather scabbard at his waist. "I'll protect you." He pulled the weapon out of its case and held it high.

Becky moved away. "Be careful with that thing," she cried. "You'll chop off our heads before the gelfelchin ever does."

"I know how to use it," Matthew said. He swung the blade and hit the trunk of the tree as hard as he could.

Whack!

"Matthew!" Becky said, shielding her face from flying splinters.

Matthew pulled on the (now very stuck) sword in the tree. Suddenly, the tree swayed back and forth and *cracked* in two.

"Whoa!" Matthew said. He grabbed the (now very loose) sword and ran.

"It's going to fall!" Jonathan said. "Everyone run!"

The twins screamed (like always), and the children scampered as the giant tree tumbled into the woods with a loud *crash!*

Becky held her chest with her hand and breathed heavily.

"Whoops," Matthew said to her glower.

"Put...that...sword away!" Becky said, sputtering. "You're going to kill us all."

"Not only that," Jonathan said. "The noise of the falling tree may have given away where we are to any goblin looking for us, if it hasn't already."

At that moment, Becky stood motionless, her eyes bugging out.

Jonathan stared at her. "What?" he asked her. "Do you see something?"

"Yes," Becky said. "Look. We've run into the forest!" (What did they expect?)

"No!" Jonathan said. He turned and stared at the trees surrounding them. "NO!" He glared at Matthew. "Matthew, look what you've done. See what you made us do by stupidly swinging that sword?"

"I don't care," Matthew said with a smug smile. "I'm not going to let any gelfelchin chop off our heads." He reached to draw the sword again.

"No!" everyone said.

Matthew immediately released his hand from the hilt.

"C'mon," Becky said. "Let's quickly get back to the trail before any goblins find us."

"Good idea," Jonathan said.

They walked cautiously.

Suddenly, a twig snapped close by.

Snap!

"Did you hear that?" Becky said to the others.

They all stopped.

"What?" Jonathan said.

"Listen, something's moving."

"I hear it, too," Matthew said.

"What is it?" Mary asked softly and grabbed Elizabeth's hand.

"I...I...don't know," Becky whispered. It was then that she made out sounds of people (or things) talking to one another not far from where they stood.

"What's that?" Elizabeth said.

"Goblins?" Mary said, trembling. She clutched Elizabeth.

Rustle. Rustle. Rustle.

Becky peered in the direction of the noises to see if she could see anything.

Nothing.

"The trail's not far, let's keep going," Jonathan said in a high-pitched voice.

"Yes, let's," Becky said, still moving her eyes in the direction of the noise. She heard a pebble hit against a tree, followed by the crackle of a breaking branch. "Uh..."

"Something's stirring by those trees," Matthew pointed out. "Near those bushes. See them?"

Becky looked. In the midst of the vegetation, two creatures with green bodies moved in their direction. They probed the bushes as though looking for something or someone.

Becky felt her heart beat faster. "Uh, we need to hide...now." She looked about frantically.

"Er," Jonathan said. "You think they're gob...?"

"I heard them, and now I smell them, they're nearby. They *are* in the forest," one green body could be heard saying.

"See...and you thought they were buried in the ground," the other green body could be heard answering back.

Becky and Jonathan looked at each other.

"Gob...gob...gob..." Jonathan said.

Closer.

"Uh," Becky said. "Let's h-h-hide."

The children were frozen in fear.

Closer.

"W-w-what?" Jonathan said.

Closer. Closer.

"H-h-hide."

"W-w-what?"

"HIDE!" Becky screamed. *"Before the goblins come and chop off our pretty little heads!"*

And with those panicked words (and screaming their pretty little heads off), the children scattered into the forest, here and there, never looking back, never waiting for the others to catch up.

In the Forest of Large Squirrels

Here and there, hither and thither, up and down, and all around, Becky ran into the thickest bushes, scratching her arms; not caring in the least. No goblin was going to get her. Not now. Not ever. She ran...and ran...and ran...until finally she could not run any longer.

She bent over and put her hands on her knees. "I need...*pant* ...to...*wheeze*...rest," she said. She slumped behind a large tree. The goblins, she felt assured, were far behind her. She looked around...not one of her siblings had followed her. (Did that surprise her?) "As soon as I'm rested, I'll find them," she said, panting with her tongue sticking out.

At that moment, an acorn fell near her.

Plunk.

She stared at it and then up from where it had fallen. It could not escape her notice that half the tree branches had orange and red leaves and the other half had green. "How odd...I must be at some halfway point between summer and fall. If the land changes this rapidly...what about distances? The North Pole might be over the next hill; the South Pole a few hills back."

Thump!

She stopped breathing. Was it another acorn? No, the sound was too loud. She looked around to see what had dropped. Suddenly, the bush in front of her moved.

Becky jumped a little. "Uh...what's that?"

With as much courage as she could muster, she inched over to the bush. "It's not a goblin," she said to herself. "It's not. It can't be. It would be way too big to be in such a small plant." She stopped briefly. "But if it was...?" She shook her head, but continued to inch forward. "Oh, please don't let it be a goblin." She closed her eyes and opened the foliage. Realizing that she had not been eaten, she opened her eyes at a squint. "Please...Oh!" She opened her eyes wide when she saw what was in the bushes and smiled. To her pleasant surprise she found, not a goblin, but a baby squirrel with huge eyes staring up at her. The surprise was that it was three feet long.

"Aw, you poor thing...caught in the bush, unable to move. My, are you large!"

The baby squirrel did not make a sound, but lay there, blinking with big beady brown eyes.

"Where are your parents?"

The tiny (um, uh, large) squirrel blinked, which was all it seemed able to do.

Becky heard chattering noises high in the treetops. "I see. Your nest must be up there." She examined the branches. "I think I can climb up. If I knew where you fell from, I could put you back."

She heard a pattering sound coming down the tree.

Patter. Patter. Patter.

She did not have time to imagine what it could be as she suddenly found herself face-to-face with a rather large (and I do mean large) gray squirrel.

Becky jumped back, hair on end. "Oh," she said. "You startled me."

"Stand back," the large gray squirrel said, giving her a stern look and making its hair puff out so that it looked twice as big.

"But, I wasn't..."

"You heard me, goblin, get away from my child or I'll go for your throat." At once, it lifted its head and showed its sharp teeth. "And you know I can do it."

"Really," Becky said, eyeing its sharp yellow teeth. "This isn't necessary; I wasn't going to harm it."

The large gray squirrel sneered. "A goblin saying that? I find that hard to believe."

"I'm not a goblin." Becky frowned. "I'm rather insulted that you would think that!"

The large gray squirrel took a few glances up and down Becky, and then said:

"You are a goblin."

"I'm not," Becky said in disbelief. "Do I have green skin and hideous fangs?" She showed her hands and opened her mouth.

The large gray squirrel squinted at Becky in a suspicious manner. "You might."

"Oh!"

(Becky felt this conversation to be like the discussion with the annoying small pig. Imagine, she thought, if the squirrels thought she looked like a squirrel and made her their Squirrel queen. Or the goblins thought she looked like a goblin and made her their Goblin queen. Or the leaves of the forest thought she looked like a maple leaf and made her their Maple Leaf queen.)

"Look," she said, reaching for the bush. "Your rather overgrown baby is unable to free himself from these branches. Let me do it and you carry him back to his nest."

The large gray squirrel let out a loud chatter:

"Stay back, I'm warning you. I have my fangs on you, goblin!"

A voice from an upper tree branch called out:

"Is our son safe?"

"Yes," the large gray squirrel responded, his brown eyes fixed on Becky's outstretched hand.

"Is he well?"

"Yes, but there's a goblin standing next to him."

"A goblin?"

Patter. Patter. Patter.

"What goblin?" the voice now asked from behind the tree.

"Here, in front of me. Are you blind, squirrel?" the large gray squirrel said.

"That's not a goblin, you silly rodent," the voice said and then out popped another very large gray squirrel from the other side of the tree, wearing a very large blue apron. "Why...it's a child...a human child. How cute!"

The large gray squirrel came up next to the first large gray squirrel.

"It is?" asked the first large gray squirrel.

The second large gray squirrel (who, Becky considered, could only be the baby's mother) drew near. "What are you doing here, little girl? Are you lost?" she asked in a motherly tone.

"No," Becky said. "My brothers and sisters found a staircase leading to this land. We touched the Tree of Balance and freed it. Now, we're on our way to the northern regions of your land to find and bring back the tree."

"Oh, so you're one of the Tree Seekers? I've heard all about you. The gossip is heavy in the trees. Imagine finding you here in the forest of squirrels."

"Yes, imagine that," Becky said with a nervous laugh, eyeing the ever-threatening large gray father squirrel staring at her. She began to twiddle her fingers.

On seeing this, the mother squirrel drew even closer. "Your species is good with its hands, isn't it?"

"Yes, I can draw stick figures and clouds." (This was the best reply Becky could come up with at that moment.)

"Please," the mother squirrel said with a saddened look, "my heart dropped with my baby. I knew it would be difficult to free him from this bush, but now that you're here, would you be so kind to lift him out? We'll carry him after that."

"Yes, of course. I was going to do that all along, but your husband stopped me," Becky said, staring at the father squirrel who bared his teeth with his wife's back turned.

"He's not all that bright...but he means well."

The father squirrel made an irritable sound and ran up the tree.

Becky reached down, cradled the baby squirrel in one hand, and removed a branch with the other. She brought the child to safety and handed him to his mother, who (she now saw) had huge squirrely-dog eyes.

"Here he is," she said.

"You made it seem so easy," the mother squirrel said with relief. "How can I repay you?"

"By bringing him back to his nest in one piece," Becky said.

"How thoughtful," the mother squirrel said with what might have been, or so Becky thought...a smile. The mother squirrel grabbed her child by his neck and scampered back up the tree. The father squirrel stared at Becky from a branch.

Becky stared back, unsure of what to do.

The father squirrel cleared his throat as if reluctantly wanting to speak. Finally, he smiled. "We owe you," he said. "If ever you're in a battle, we'll be there for you." He turned and hurried after his wife.

Becky breathed a sigh of relief, and mumbled to herself:

"At least he didn't leap for my throat."

At that moment, another acorn fell near her feet.

Plunk.

Noticing this, Becky thought of the baby squirrel dropping again. Because he might hurt himself if he did so, she reached down and broke the remaining branches in the bush, picked up some nearby leaves, and stuffed them in the space she had made. "This should cushion the fall if he falls again," she said with great satisfaction, but as she looked at the red and orange leaves she was using and repeated the word "fall," she remembered her brothers and sisters

whom she had last seen in a forest with red and orange falling leaves, and now what she felt was great dissatisfaction.

"Oh, I'd forgotten all about them." She stood up. "I'd better go look for them." She turned this way and that. "But which way do I go? Do I go into summer or back into autumn? Hmm...I normally run faster than they do, so I doubt they're ahead of me. It only makes sense to go back into fall." She tripped over a branch and fell into fall. "Oh!" she said. She got up, and hurried off. Not more than ten feet later, she heard a noise. It could have been another squirrel scampering above her or a leaf rustling in the wind, but it did not matter, for the sound made her aware again of why she was in that part of the woods...*goblins!* She looked about. "What if those beasts are lurking behind a tree or a bush waiting to devour me? What will I do then?"

She slowed her steps.

"What if they're hiding so well I can't see them? Then they'll pounce on me and take me to the gelfelchin."

She stopped altogether.

At that precise moment, she heard a loud *crunching* noise not too far in front of her followed by a *rustle* and then a *snap*.

"Oh," she panicked. "I can't believe it! It really *is* goblins!"

The sounds grew closer and closer.

She frantically looked for a place to hide. "I need to get out of here."

She turned to run into summer, but, before she could manage to move one leg, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"No!" she screamed, flailing her arms to try to get away. "Don't touch me!"

"Shh," a voice said. "Do you want the goblins to hear you?"

Becky glanced at the hand. It was human. "Jonathan?" Turning, she came face-to-face with a strange young man. Her heart jumped. "Oh, my!"

The young man took his hand off her shoulder and motioned for Becky to follow him.

"This way. I know a place for you to hide until the goblins leave."

"Who...who are you?"

"Does it matter? We don't have time to talk. Quick. This way."

Becky followed close behind this man with brown eyes and thick, curly, black hair. She wondered who he was...another human in this strange land. The young man turned and went into summer. Becky followed. Perhaps he was half-human, half-fairy...a gelfling? The young man turned and went into fall. Becky followed and felt compelled to ask:

"Where are we going?"

She ducked under some stray wood.

"It's not far, you'll see," the young man said.

In a few minutes, the young man brought her to a series of large rocks. "In here," he said. "You'll be safe...I'll go find the others."

Becky was shocked.

"My brothers and sisters? You know about them?"

"I've seen the posters," the young man said. "Wait here, I'll be back with them and also bring firewood."

"Firewood? Are you going to cook something?" Becky hoped he would, as she had not eaten since breakfast.

"No, to keep warm. I'm very cold," the young man said, and then went off toward summer.

Becky stared. Cold? What was the young man talking about? It wasn't cold. Sweat was running down her face and back. She must have heard wrong. She would ask the young man as soon as he came back.

~ ~ ~

Matthew breathed a sigh of relief. The goblins had searched nearby, but had not found him. He hid behind a large bush and peered through its branches.

"I'm not leaving until I'm sure they're good and gone," he mumbled to himself.

He kept as quiet as he could.

Patter. Patter. Patter.

"What's that?"

Patter. Patter. Patter.

"A goblin out there? I'll pound it if it gets too close..." He rolled his hand into a fist.

The pattering stopped.

Matthew listened for more pattering sounds, but heard nothing. Suddenly, he became aware of tiny breathing noises on the tree trunk behind him.

Matthew unclenched his fist. "Wait," he thought. "Goblins don't sound like that." He turned and came face-to-face with a blue-furred squirrel.

"Ah!" Matthew said, but quickly covered his mouth.

The blue-furred squirrel looked at Matthew in a quizzical way. Before Matthew could say a word, the blue-furred squirrel chattered away:

"What's your name? Do you have a name? I do. What's yours?"

At that moment, a twig snapped nearby.

Snap.

"I asked you if you had a name," the blue-furred squirrel said loudly.

Matthew panicked. "Shh. Did you hear that?"

"Are you telling me to be quiet?" the blue-furred squirrel said even louder.

"Be quiet," Matthew whispered. "Goblins are looking for me. I don't want them to find me hiding in this bush. We must keep our voices down."

"Do you have any food?" the squirrel said, speaking louder than ever before, and rubbing his little furry tummy. "I'm running up and down this tree, but can't find any."

Matthew put his hands to his ears. "No," he said in a very low, but patient voice (he would have lost it with the twins). "Did you look on the ground? Acorns normally are found there." He reached down and grabbed a nut. "Like this one. See? Here. Take this and leave."

"You're my pal," the blue-furred squirrel said.

"Now, if you don't mind..." Matthew turned away and scanned the forest.

The blue-furred squirrel chewed on the acorn, making loud crunching noises.

"So, you're hiding from someone?" the blue-furred squirrel said with a full mouth, spraying out some spare food.

Matthew did not respond.

"Playing hide-and-seek?"

Matthew remained still.

"Playing hide-and-seek with goblins? Is that it? Is that what you're doing?"

Matthew growled and wished the blue-furred squirrel would go away. He did not answer.

"I'll play with you," the blue-furred squirrel said, turned and scampered off.

After a few minutes of silence, Matthew thought (with considerable relief):

"Good. It's finally gone."

Suddenly, the leaves on the bushes next to him moved. He held his breath. "Oh no," he thought, bracing himself to see a goblin. He turned his head...a little at a time...inch by inch. Was there a goblin next to him? Slowly. Slowly.

Suddenly, without warning, the blue-furred squirrel's head popped out of the bush. "*I see you!*"

Matthew jumped. "Argh! What's your problem? I'm not playing. This is serious. Goblins want to capture me."

The blue-furred squirrel raised its head.

"Don't you understand?" Matthew said impatiently.

The blue-furred squirrel's nose twitched. It cocked its head to one side as though listening for something.

"Well? Do you?" Matthew said angrily.

The blue-furred squirrel's mouth dropped open. "It's a...it's a..." it chattered.

"What? What is it?" Matthew said rather annoyed.

"It's a goblin!" it shrieked.

Before Matthew could repeat the word, "goblin," the blue-furred squirrel turned and dashed up the tree. Suddenly, Matthew saw a shadow on the tree trunk as though someone or something was creeping up from behind.

He felt his throat tighten.

The shadow grew darker.

His knees started to shake.

Darker. Darker.

Was that breathing he heard behind him?

Darker. Darker.

He could not contain himself any longer.

"Goblin!" he cried at the top of his lungs. "Go away! Leave me alone! I didn't take the ruby off the tree!" He put his head between his knees and rocked back and forth. "It's over, it's all over. They'll be putting their claws into my skin any second now."

Silence.

"Any minute," he said, rocking back and forth.

Nothing.

He lifted his head. A young man stared back at him with a confused look.

"You have a death wish?" the young man said. "You want the goblins to find you...screaming like that?"

Matthew could not believe it...another human in this land?
"Hello? Who are you?"

"Does it matter?" the young man replied. "Come with me. I've hidden your sister; I'll hide you, too." He motioned for Matthew to follow.

Matthew stood up. "You did? You will?"

"Hurry, before the goblins come back."

Matthew left the bushes and followed the strange young man to where Becky was waiting.

The blue-furred squirrel watched him from a branch high in the tree. "Bye, playmate," it said, waving and chewing on an acorn. "Maybe one day you'll come back, and we can play longer."

Matthew was so happy to be safe that he actually smiled and waved back.

~ ~ ~

Mary and Elizabeth had run together, or so they thought. Mary jumped into a bush and got as low to the ground as she could.

"If a goblin runs past me, it won't see me," she thought, laughing and thinking this to be a game.

At that moment, she heard a nearby bush shaking. Without considering that it might be a goblin searching for her, she called out:

"Is that you, Elizabeth?"

"Is that you, Mary?"

"Yes," Mary shouted.

"Shh."

Pause.

"Where are you?" Mary said loudly.

"I'm in a bush," Elizabeth whispered.

"So am I." Mary stood up. "Where?" she said, scanning the forest, totally clueless.

"Shh."

"I want to hide with you."

"No."

Mary went toward Elizabeth's voice. She found her sister crouching behind a bare bush. "There you are," she said, laughing. "Scoot over."

Elizabeth looked up. "Are you crazy? You want the goblins to find us?"

"Elizabeth, this bush will never do," Mary said. "There are no leaves."

"And you? Out in the open?"

"Let's find a bush we both can hide behind," Mary said, tugging on her sister's sleeve.

Elizabeth got up. "Which bush?" (She had just become as clueless as her sister to the fact that standing up and looking around was not the best thing in the world to do when goblins were seeking for you.)

Mary looked around. "That one," she said, pointing. "With the lovely yellow and orange leaves."

"Don't you think it's rather small? And yellow? It doesn't match our clothes."

Mary nodded and walked over to another bush. "Hey, Elizabeth! Here's one with red leaves. How charming."

"It's too red," Elizabeth protested. She searched for some bushes away from her sister. "We need a bush with less color."

(Jonathan was hiding in a nearby bush. He could not believe the twins. They were supposed to be hidden, not worrying themselves about fall fashion.)

"How about a tree?" Mary said.

"With gray or brown bark?" Elizabeth said.

"No, speckled."

Pause.

"Perfect!" Elizabeth screamed with obvious delight.

"I thought you'd like that idea," Mary said, smiling broadly.

(Jonathan was in a nervous jitter.)

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

("What are they doing now?" Jonathan thought. He lifted his head. The twins were stepping on the fallen leaves as hard as they could. His mouth opened in disbelief.)

"This tree?" Mary said.

"You think it wide enough to fit both of us?"

"Go behind and I'll see."

Elizabeth stomped behind the tree.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

(Jonathan winced.)

"Can you see me?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes," Mary said. "I see your arms and legs."

Elizabeth waved at her. "Yoo-hoo, I'm a talking tree."

Mary laughed...followed by a clap...and then a giggle.

(Jonathan made a low growl which meant, "What are you guys doing? Are you crazy? Hurry up and hide!")

"Do it again!" Mary cried, clapping some more.

"Nyah, nyah," Elizabeth said, putting her thumbs on each side of the bark and moving her fingers up and down. "Nyah, nyah."

("No," Jonathan said in a deep, coarse voice, shaking his head. "I'll just have to scare them to hide them...")

Suddenly, the twins became quiet.

(Jonathan waited. He heard another noise...perhaps a shuffle or two, a slight shaking of a bush and a soft thud on the ground, but that was about it.)

Silence.

More silence.

Continued silence.

("Finally," he thought, relieved and satisfied. "They're hid...")

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Swish! Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Swiiisssshhhhh! Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

(He lifted his head again. Mary was hitting a rock against a tree. Elizabeth had found a stick and was running it across the tops of several plants and then across their bare branches.)

Whack!

Swish!

Clunk!

Whack!

Swish!

Clunk!

(Enough was enough. Every goblin for miles around had to be deaf not to hear this noise.)

Jonathan jumped out of the foliage. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "Are you both crazy? What's with all this noise?"

The twins immediately dropped their rock and stick.

"The goblins will find us all for sure with all that racket!" Jonathan shouted.

"Jonathan," Elizabeth said clueless. "Were you hiding in that bush?"

"Does it matter?" Jonathan said. "I should be swinging from a branch with you two around."

"You scared me," Mary said surprised to see Jonathan. "I thought you were a bear." (Scared of a bear, but totally unaware that goblins are after them.)

"A bear?" Jonathan growled.

Patter. Patter. Patter.

"What's that noise?" Elizabeth said.

"A goblin's heading in our direction," Mary said (now a little worried).

"No," Jonathan said. "It's coming from..."

The twins ran around Jonathan's legs.

Patter. Patter. Patter.

Before Jonathan could tell them that goblins do not make "pattering" noises high in the treetops, a large brown squirrel crawled down a nearby trunk and looked at the children.

"St...st...st..." it said.

"That squirrel, it's trying to talk," Elizabeth said.

The children watched its attempts to speak.

"Come on," Mary said. "You can do it."

"St...st...stinkpots," it said.

"Yay, it spoke!" the twins cheered.

"Hey," Jonathan said indignantly. "We're not stinkpots."

"I'm sorry," the large squirrel said. "You looked like someone I saw on a sign." It drew near to Jonathan. "Aren't you a king?"

"NO!"

"Please, Mr. Squirrel, can you help us find our brother and sister?" Elizabeth asked.

Mary gathered acorns from the ground.

"What do they look like?" the large squirrel asked.

"Brown hair, brown eyes."

"Like me?"

Mary offered the acorns to the large squirrel who took them with gratitude.

"Yes!" Elizabeth said ecstatically. "Just like you!"

"They're squirrels?" the large squirrel said, chewing on an acorn.

"No," Jonathan said annoyed. "They're humans, like us."

They heard a crunching sound not too far away.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Everyone became still (except for some combined crunching of the large squirrel eating).

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

"What's that?" Mary said.

"Someone's tramping through the forest," Elizabeth said.

"Shh." Jonathan looked this way and that. He could not see anything.

For no obvious reason, the large squirrel cried out, "It's a goblin, it has to be," and ran up the tree with a shriek, dropping the acorn behind him.

The twins clutched Jonathan's legs even harder than before.

"Hey," Jonathan said.

"Save us!" the twins screamed.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan said, trying to move his legs, but weighted down by the twins. "If a goblin's coming, we need to hide. Here, in this bush with orange leaves. Quick."

"Not that one," Elizabeth said crossly. "It doesn't go with my pants."

Before Jonathan could physically pick Elizabeth up and throw her into the foliage, he caught sight of whatever it was moving toward them. "Wait a minute," he thought. "It's not green."

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

The twins clutched Jonathan's legs harder.

"That's not a goblin," Jonathan said.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

The twins closed their eyes.

"It's a...it's a..." Jonathan muttered.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Jonathan watched as a young man walked (crunched) up to him, blowing on his hands as though they were cold and needed to be warmed up.

"Hello," the young man said. "Remember me? I rescued you."

Jonathan's eyes grew wide.

"Come with me," the young man said, rubbing his hands together. "I'll show you to your brother and sister."

"Matthew and Becky?"

The twins jumped from behind Jonathan's legs.

"Becky and Matthew?"

"Are those their names? I didn't know that. This way, please." The young man motioned while shivering, turned and went back the direction he had come.

In a short time, Jonathan and the twins were happily with Becky and Matthew, who were waiting in the rocks. (At least Jonathan was happy. The twins? Well...they were just in another place to play.)

The Gelfelchin

Becky breathed a sigh of relief. "There you are," she said to Jonathan. "What happened? I thought you were behind me."

"I thought you were following me," Jonathan said.

"This running away and getting lost from one another has got to stop," Becky said. "We need to stay together when we hide."

"Shh, the goblins may be nearby," the young man said. "You want them to hear you?"

Becky forgot about Jonathan and the twins and focused her attention on this strange young man who had his arms crossed close to his body. She noticed he was shivering.

"Are you cold?" she said.

"Are you a gob...gob...?" Jonathan piped in.

The young man held one finger to his mouth to signal not to speak. He then went to a large rock and peered over the top.

Becky could not contain herself. "Who are you?" she asked in a low voice. "Where'd you come from?"

The young man ignored her.

"Are there other humans like you in this land?"

The young man held his hand up. "Be still." He cocked his head. "Do you hear that?"

Becky heard nothing.

The young man turned to Matthew. "Quick," he said. "The sword...give it to me. Hurry!"

Matthew undid the belt from his waist and tossed it to the young man, who caught it and withdrew the weapon.

"Stay here, I need to see where the goblins are." The young man pointed to Jonathan. "You...make sure no one goes outside. I won't be long."

He hastily left the hiding place.

Becky turned to the others. "I wonder who he is."

"He's the young man who rescued me from the pigs," Jonathan said. "And he said I'm in charge." (He emphasized this with a rather haughty look.)

"He's the young man who rescued you?" Becky said, ignoring Jonathan's ego trip. "How do you suppose he got here from our world?"

"Maybe he went down the same staircase we did," Matthew said.

Becky thought about that for a second. "But the staircase melted."

"Maybe he discovered it before we did."

"But there was a large rock covering the entrance."

Matthew shrugged. "I don't know, then...there must be another way into this land."

Seeing a point to show his smarts, Jonathan blurted out, "Unless he's not human."

The children looked at one another.

"Now, what kind of an assumption...?" Becky said.

Jonathan put his finger to his lips. "Shh. I hear voices."

"Goblins?" Becky's knees quivered.

"I don't know," Jonathan said. "I can barely make it out."

They waited.

"Should we hide?" Matthew said.

Nothing.

"I don't hear anything now," Jonathan said.

"Whoever it is has stopped talking," Matthew said.

Suddenly, the twins popped out from behind a rock and shouted, "Boo!"

Jonathan screamed. Becky and Matthew jumped.

"Mary! Elizabeth!" Becky said.

"I'm going to punch your faces in!" Matthew said, and rolled up his sleeves.

"Phew, at least it wasn't a gob..." Jonathan said.

Crunch.

They all became still, still as death.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Becky looked at Jonathan who looked at Matthew who looked at the others. The twins' eyes grew wider and wider.

"Gob...gob..." Jonathan stammered.

Before they could let out various expressions of fright, the young man returned. "I'm back," he said.

The children all sighed with relief.

"Oh," Becky said. "Thank goodness it's only you. You gave us a start. We thought you were a goblin."

"Not me...them." The young man pointed.

"Who?"

At that moment, Becky saw shadows on the rocks, and then, to her horror, goblins hobbled into the rocky ring. They had large green eyes and mouths full of twisted green fangs. At the tips of their green knobby fingers and toes protruded sharp, green claws. They spotted the children and cried out gleefully:

"There they are, like he said!"

"No," Becky screamed. She grabbed Elizabeth and Mary's hands and moved near to Jonathan and Matthew.

Jonathan's face went pale. "Gob...gob...gob..."

Becky looked at the young man who stood still with the sword in his hands. "What's going on?"

Matthew and the twins joined in Jonathan's stammering. "Gob...gob...gob..."

The young man did not reply. "Pick them up and take them to the wagon," he said to the goblins. "The gelfelchin is expecting them; you'll be amply rewarded for your effort. And please stop stammering, children, it's annoying!"

The kids stopped and just stared (and stared and stared). (Oh yeah, they also shook.)

"The gelfelchin?" Becky said in alarm.

"Yes," the young man said. "My master."

"Money, delicious money," the goblins slobbered. They stretched out their arms. "Come here, you succulent gobs of flesh."

Becky's face grew pale. Before she could even begin to think how to run, the goblins had her and her brothers and sisters in their arms and were carrying them out of the rocky shelter.

"Get your stinking claws off me, you jerk!" Matthew cried. He kicked his legs and tried to hit the goblin carrying him.

"Please don't eat me!" Jonathan said. "I'll do anything!"

Becky struggled to be released, but it was to no use. The goblins were too strong.

The young man opened the back of the wagon, which was nothing more than a wild animal cage with straw in its bottom. "Throw them in here."

The goblins tossed the children into the wagon.

Thump!

The young man closed the back gate and locked it.

Clink.

"Let us go!" Becky said teary-eyed. "We haven't done anything wrong to you."

The young man ignored her. He climbed on the wagon and began to drive the wagon into the autumn woods. The goblins followed after him, screeching, howling, and making all sorts of noise.

"If I ever get out of here, I'm going to pound you!" Matthew yelled, and shook the bars of the cage frantically.

"Gob...gob...gob..." Jonathan moaned.

"It's like a wagon ride!" the twins said (totally unaware of the seriousness of their current condition).

Matthew picked up a nearby stick and moved it back and forth across the bars to spite and annoy the young man.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

"Oh," Becky said to the young man (actually shouted since the goblins and Matthew were making such a racket). "Oh, you're making a mistake." She grabbed the bars. "We haven't committed any crime."

"Don't tell me," said the young man. "Tell my master. She's the one who offered a million gems for your arrest."

In a short while, they came to an opening where there was an old wooden hut with a thatched roof and whose perimeter was lined with dead rosebushes (whoever lived there was not much of a gardener). An ugly old woman came out of the old wooden hut and hurried in their direction. She appeared quite happy and ready to do a jig, if music was available.

Jonathan stopped his moaning and looked up. He could not believe it. "Hey! It's the ugly old woman who gave us the gazillion jillion dollars in sand."

"It is?" Becky said.

"She's not an ugly old woman," the young man corrected them. "She's the gelfelchin."

Becky suddenly grew weak. Matthew turned to Jonathan who turned to Matthew who turned to the twins who were playing in the hay.

The gelfelchin approached the wagon and clapped.

"Bravo, Oran, bravo. They didn't escape. Not this time, not like they did from the pigs."

"No," the young man named Oran said. "I made sure of that. I found all of them and brought them to a rocky crevice. The goblins did the rest."

"A fine job," the gelfelchin said. "A fine job all of you."

The goblins jumped up and down. "We get one million gems, we get one million gems. Where are they? Are they on you now? Let's see them. Give them to us."

"Patience, my friends," the gelfelchin said. "You'll be paid in due time, but first let me deal with these children and then I'll give you your reward."

The goblins jumped even higher at the word "reward."

Sproing! Boing! Sproing!

The gelfelchin drew near to the children and smiled, showing her yellowed teeth. "How nice to see some of you again. Too bad you used up all your wishes. You could've wished yourself free."

"Why? So you could give us some more useless items just to make fun of us?" Jonathan said, thinking of the toy boat and the mounds and mounds of sand.

"Why, I ought to..." Matthew said, and made a small fist.

The gelfelchin looked at Matthew's small fist and laughed and laughed. "Oh, I'm really scared."

Becky trembled. "W-what are you g-going to do to us? Chop off our heads?"

"Chop off your heads?" The gelfelchin laughed some more. "Do I look strong enough to do that?"

"Uh..." Becky looked at the goblins and the young man, who did seem strong enough.

"Our brothers are strong!" the twins said.

"Hush up," Jonathan said out of the corner of his mouth.

"I absolutely forbid chopping off heads," the gelfelchin said. "I'm not that sort of creature. I hate violence of any kind."

Jonathan sighed with relief.

"Oh," Becky said (and then wondered why the gelfelchin had made such violent most-wanted posters in the first place).

"No, my child," the gelfelchin said. "I'm not an evil person at all, no, not at all. Just zealous, that's all...zealous to avenge the death of the Tree of Balance...if it indeed is dead." She came up to Becky's face. "Rumor has it that you destroyed it. Did you?"

"No...I..."

"We didn't do it!" Matthew said firmly.

"Shh, don't speak," said the gelfelchin. "I've ways to find out if the rumor is true or not. If you're guiltless in the death of the Tree of Balance, no harm will come to any of you."

"Whew, that's a relief," said Jonathan, getting up from the straw.

"And how are you going to find out if the rumor is true or not?" Becky said. "Ask the pixie; the dwarf in the rock formation?"

"No time for that. I may not be able to find them," the gelfelchin said. "No, I've my own means without going to any outsiders."

"You do?"

"Yes, I've a simple test...one which I've spent many a day devising."

"Uh...what is it?" Becky asked.

"In the back of my hut, near the forest, are several underground stone cages where I keep wild animals from time to time. I'm going to put you in one of these cages and not give you any food or water for eighteen days."

"Eighteen days?" Becky questioned her hearing.

"Eighteen days?" said Jonathan in a high-pitched voice.

"Nuh-uh." Matthew narrowed his eyes.

"Yay, animals!" the twins cheered.

"Yes, eighteen days," the gelfelchin said. "And, if you're innocent of this horrendous crime, you'll still be alive. If not, you'll be a shining example of the greatness of this fine land's justice system."

Becky's mouth dropped. Jonathan fell back to the straw. And Matthew frowned, thinking of how he was going to beat up the gel-

felchin and Oran once he was freed. The twins...well, they were wrestling in the hay, acting like dinosaurs.

The gelfelchin dismissed the goblins (who were eager to leave, since they hated being in the light) and told them to come back in eighteen days. She turned to Oran.

"Put the children into their cage."

"Yes, right away," Oran said.

"No!" Matthew protested.

"Now wait a minute," Becky said.

"Don't worry, children," the gelfelchin answered. "Everything will be okay if you're blameless."

"Yes, but..."

"But nothing. Oran, hurry, please."

"If you lay one hand on my brothers or sisters..." Matthew said.

"Oran!"

Oran took the children to the back of the hut to the underground stone cages with barred windows at ground level. He opened one of the barred windows, positioned the cart, and pulled a lever on its side. The cart quivered, trembled, and then *sproing!*, tipped upright. Becky, Matthew, Jonathan, and the twins tumbled into the underground stone cage (which fortunately had a bed of hay to cushion their fall).

Plop!

"Whoa!" they all cried.

Oran quickly slid the bars closed and locked them.

Clink.

He bent down to make sure the children were unharmed, and then stood up and left.

Becky and Matthew got up from the floor, grabbed the bars, and screamed together. "No! This is madness!"

"Come back so I can punch you!" Matthew said.

Oran ignored them, and returned to the gelfelchin, who put her arm around his shoulder.

"Come, Oran, my dear pet," the gelfelchin said. "Let's celebrate the capture of these children by covering your body from head to foot with jewels. They'll keep you warm. You'll like that, won't you?"

"Yes, I'm very cold," Oran said, shivering. He followed her into the hut.

And when Becky and Matthew heard this crazy idea to keep oneself warm by wearing jewels, and then reflected on the gelfelchin's cockeyed eighteen-day scheme to discover their guilt, they suddenly realized something at the same time...they were never going to get out of that underground stone cage alive, now or forever! The gelfelchin was insane. Totally insane! (And Oran wasn't too far behind, either!)

A Bark, a Snort, and a Meow

Mary began a word game Elizabeth and she used to play from time to time when they had nothing better to do (being trapped in the gelfelchin's cage without a computer or TV, that is).

"The kitty and the...?" Mary said, taking this very seriously.

"Kat?" Elizabeth said, smiling broadly.

"Both took a...?" Mary looked at her.

"Bath?" Elizabeth answered.

"While the hippo and the...?" Mary stopped.

"Potomus?" Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Looked on," Mary said.

Both twins giggled.

(It was Elizabeth's turn now to start the next sentence.)

"Said the rhino and the...?"

"Saucerous?" Mary suggested.

"The whole thing is...?"

"We don't have time for this," Becky said to the twins. "We're trapped in an insane gelfelchin's underground stone cage, don't you realize that? We need to figure out how to escape."

The twins stared at her briefly, and then continued their game.

"The whole thing is...?" Elizabeth said.

"Uh...?" Mary said.

Becky shook her head. She believed that the twins did not understand anything.

Jonathan sat in the corner. Matthew stood shaking the bars.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Becky could hear Jonathan's stomach growl above the many clangs of Matthew shaking bars.

"I wonder how long we've been here," Jonathan said, rubbing his stomach.

"Let me out of here, you punks!" Matthew said.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

"I don't know," Becky said to Jonathan, staring at Matthew. "Not long, one hour."

"Hurry up, Mary," Elizabeth said. "The whole thing is...?"

"Uh...?" Mary said.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

"I'm starved," Jonathan groaned. "I've not eaten since breakfast."

"You let me out," Matthew said, "or I'll get a...um...Becky, who helps people win in court?"

"Lawyers," Becky said, and then to Jonathan, "Forget about eating. We'll all starve unless we find a way out of here."

Jonathan whimpered.

"I want a lawyer!" Matthew screamed.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

After a few more spastic shakes of the bars, Matthew slumped down in defeat. "It's hopeless," he answered. "I've tried to move the bars. They're rock solid."

"Speaking of rocks..." Becky examined the stones in the wall nearest her for any signs of weakness.

Scrape. Scrape.

She stopped. "Do you hear that?"

Scrape.

"Listen."

All the children stopped what they were doing and listened.

At that moment, a small, muffled voice said, "What did the...*snort*...rhino and the...*snort*...saucerous say?"

Becky looked at the others as though one of them may have thrown their voice, but knowing that none of them had any ventriloquistic skills that you could write home about, knocked on the wall. "Hello? Who's there?"

The voice continued in an even louder tone as if to make itself heard, "The...*snort*...rhino, what...*snort*...did it say?"

Becky looked puzzled. She put her ear next to the wall. "The rhino?"

The twins stared off into space.

"Or the...*snort*...saucerous. I...*snort*...forget," the voice said.

"Uh...?" Becky said.

"I know," Mary said, breaking out of her random trance and smiling.

"Finally! After like...a gazillion jillion years!" Elizabeth said annoyed.

Mary ran over to the wall, cupped her hands and replied, laughing, "Said the rhino and the saucerous...the whole thing's...preposter-i-o-us!"

Becky frowned (but at the same time wondered how Mary knew such a big word as *preposterious*, if such a word existed). She said back to the person...or thing...that had asked the question:

"Oh that. It's just a word game my twin sisters were playing. Nothing else. Not important."

"How...*snort*...funny," the voice said. "So...*snort*...clever...*snort*."

Becky wondered what all this snorting meant. She touched the wall. "Are you all right?"

"Yes...*snort*...I am," the voice said. "Thank you...*snort*...for asking...*snort*."

"But your voice?"

"Don't pigs snort?" Jonathan asked Matthew, quivering.

"Uh-oh," Matthew said.

"My...*snort*...voice?" the voice said.

"It sounds strange," Becky said.

"I'll bet you a dollar it's a pig," Mary whispered to Elizabeth.

"Deal!" said Elizabeth.

"What's wrong with my...*snort*...voice?" the voice said.

"It's nothing really," Becky said, shaking her head in a confused thought (and trying not to be rude). "But it's just that...uh...that...um...that you sound like a..."

"Like a what, dear?"

"Like a pig," Becky said reluctantly.

"So do you," Matthew snickered and mumbled.

Jonathan and the twins laughed.

Becky turned to scold them, but the voice answered back:

"That's because...*snort*...I am a...*snort*...pig," the voice said.

Becky's eyes widened. "Really?"

Mary motioned for Elizabeth to pay up. "You owe me a dollar when we get home..."

"Yes and more than a...*snort*...pig, a royal swine," the voice said.

"A queen. A Pig Queen."

"No!"

"Yes. You sound...*snort*...surprised."

(Jonathan checked the straw to make sure there were no pearls around.)

"I am," Becky said. "Well...maybe not. It's just that I can't believe I'm talking to another Pig Queen. You see, I was a Pig Queen for a few hours just this very morning and to meet another Pig Queen in such a short time is amazing."

Another pause.

"What?" the Pig Queen said. "A Pig Queen for a few hours? Are you a...*snort*...pig?"

"No, I'm a little girl."

Additional pause.

"Snort?"

"Yes, I fell off a trail going to the northern regions of your land, and a small pig met me and asked me to be the pigpen's ruler until theirs should show up. But they treated me like a servant and nothing like a queen."

"They did?" the Pig Queen said in a surprised voice.

"You deserved it," Matthew mumbled.

Becky turned to Matthew, but Matthew looked up at the cage's ceiling as if to seem innocent of his comment.

Becky turned back to the wall. "Yes, they did," she said to the Pig Queen. At that moment, she could hear what sounded like angry shuffling (and snorting) coming from across the wall. "And my brothers and sisters had to rescue me, or I'd still be washing clothes, cooking dinner, and mending fences. In fact, the real Pig Queen never showed up."

"Of course not," the Pig Queen replied in a sarcastic tone. She let out a noisy grunt. "The nerve of those...snort...swine. If I ever...snort...get out of this place."

"And they tried to eat me!" Jonathan added in.

"They did?" the Pig Queen said. "And why is that?"

"Because I waved pearls at them," Jonathan said.

"Pearls?" the Pig Queen said. And there was more angry shuffling (and snorting) coming from across the wall (but not because of royal displeasure with the pigs for wanting to eat Jonathan, but at Jonathan for daring to wave pearls before swine—the pig!).

"I hope their queen teaches them some manners," Becky said.

"Oh, I don't think you need to worry about that," the Pig Queen said. "I'm not going to let them get away with this...snort...offense."

Pause.

"You're not?"

"No."

"And how is that?" Becky said. "Do you know their queen? Will you tell her?"

"Of course, I will," the Pig Queen said. "For you see...*snort*... there's only one...*snort*...Pig Queen in all of this land...and I'm it."

"You're...you're the queen they've been waiting for?"

"One and the same."

"Your Majesty," the twins said, and bowed to a queen they could not see.

Becky was overjoyed. "I can't believe it. Here I am talking to the actual Pig Queen."

(She could not wait to tattle on every bad pig she remembered!)

Suddenly, the voice of the gelfelchin rang out:

"No, Oran, don't give the prisoners any water, either!"

Becky frowned. She said to the Pig Queen:

"Even though I'm happy to meet you, little good it does if we're both to die."

"Don't give up hope," the Pig Queen said (without snorting this time, which surprised Becky who had expected to hear it). "My royal subjects will send out soldiers to find me before too long. When they discover I'm locked up in the gelfelchin's underground stone cage, they'll rescue me."

"Unless they're too busy guarding that tunnel still, them being stupid swine and all," Matthew whispered to Jonathan and the twins.

"And, when they rescue me," the Pig Queen said (mercifully not hearing Matthew), "I'll have them release you as well...unless the gelfelchin eats me, but I don't think she has that in mind. Instead, I think she intends to use my body parts for her potions or something like that."

"Oh...that's horrible," Becky said.

At that moment, the gelfelchin returned with several meat pies and stared at the children from her hollow, sunken eyes. "Enjoying your stay?"

"Yes, very! Thank you for this comfortable hay," the twins said (as I said...clueless).

The Pig Queen rebuked the gelfelchin from her cage. "I think it's very cruel to lock children up."

"Quiet, swine!" the gelfelchin said. She laid the pies on the ground a few inches from the children's reach.

Jonathan and Matthew smelled the food and stood up.

"I can't eat these now. Too hot," the gelfelchin said. "I think I'll let them cool off a bit more. No one cares for warm, spicy meat pies. Much better served cold."

The boys stared at the stuffed pastries with their tongues hanging out.

"Smell good, don't they?" the gelfelchin asked them. She began to wave her apron at the pies to cool them down. "Mmm, so delicious, too. It's a shame you can't taste them now. Maybe after eighteen days."

Jonathan's and Matthew's faces quickly fell, and they dropped to the straw.

"You monster!" Jonathan said.

Before Becky could tell the gelfelchin she thought her to be mean and heartless to taunt them like this, the fairy picture book in her pocket jumped and moved about. "What's this?" she thought surprised. She bent down so the gelfelchin would not see her, and pulled out the fairy picture book.

Matthew watched her. "Why are you taking the book out? It's nothing but blank pages, remember?"

"I want pie!" Jonathan said, stood up and started to shake the bars. The twins joined in for want of nothing better to do.

"The book moved in my pants pocket," Becky said to Matthew. "It must want to tell us something." She opened the book and stopped. Nothing. She turned the page. Again, a blank page. Suddenly, the pages turned by themselves. "Oh!" she said.

"How did you do that?" Matthew said shocked.

"I didn't," said Becky (also shocked).

"Where did it turn to?"

"I don't know." Becky looked down, expecting to see another blank page, but, instead of a blank page, she saw words that appeared and disappeared, appeared and disappeared. "Oh," she said.

"What?" Matthew said.

"What do we want?" Jonathan chanted.

"Pie!" the twins shouted.

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

"It's, uh, it's, uh..." Becky brought the fairy picture book closer to her face. "It's, um, it's...It looks like...like..."

"Like what?" Matthew said.

"It's...it's..."

"Keep chanting," Jonathan told the twins. "I'm taking a rest."

"It's what?" Matthew said, becoming frustrated.

Becky lifted her head. "It's instructions to send for the North Wind."

"The North Wind?"

"I wish," Jonathan said, panting. "It's so hot in this cage."

Becky held up the book and read in a low voice, for fear the gelfelchin might hear her and snatch the book away (although it was a little hard for the gelfelchin to hear anything, what with the twins yelling and the Pig Queen snorting, having joined in the twins' obnoxious banter):

To send for the North Wind, turn around three times, jump up and down, wrinkle your face, cackle like a hen, throw your arms out, and SHOUT the following:

Come North Wind,

Come and blow,

Come North Wind,

Blow, blow, blow.

"And then what?" Matthew asked.

"That's it," Becky said.

Matthew wrinkled his nose. "That's all?"

Becky flipped through random pages. "That's all there is."

"Stupid book," Matthew said.

"Maybe not," Becky said. "The North Wind might come and blow these bars away."

"And us as well if it's that strong," Jonathan said anxiously.

"Go on, Becky, do it," Matthew said.

"Okay," Becky said. She put her finger to her mouth to tell the others not to say anything.

The twins stopped shouting, and so did the Pig Queen, who had not seen Becky put her finger to her mouth, but her royal instinct (or, because she had not bathed for some time, royal *instinkt*) told her to keep quiet in a moment of solemn swine silence.

Becky then slowly lifted herself up and looked through the bars. The gelfelchin was preoccupied with cooling down her pies. "Good," she thought. She bent back down, and then, as quietly as she could, turned around three times, jumped up and down, wrinkled her face, cackled like a hen (although very softly), threw out her arms, and *whispered* instead of shouting:

Come North Wind,

Come and blow,

Come North Wind,

Blow, blow, blow.

"You're supposed to shout," Elizabeth said, sucking her thumb (and then taking it out of her mouth quickly for fear of Matthew, hitting her arm again in his *unasked* role of Elizabeth's personal "quit-sucking-your-thumb" trainer).

"Not now," Becky said. "The gelfelchin will hear me."

"The North Wind won't show up unless you shout," Mary said matter-of-factly.

"I can't," Becky said. Suddenly, she heard barking and voices coming from the front of the hut. She stood up and saw the gelfelchin turning.

"Visitors? How dare," the gelfelchin snarled. "I've never given permission for anyone to enter my territory." She hurried off.

"What's happening?" Matthew said.

"The gelfelchin's gone to the front of her house."

"Good. Now you can shout out the instructions."

"Yes, yes," Becky said, but before she could do it, a dog came around the corner and barked at a white cat that was staring longingly at the meat pies.

"The goblins have returned," he yapped. "They've said the forest is filling up with sand and it's heading this way."

"A sandstorm?" the white cat said. "In this neck of the woods? How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but I see it coming."

Becky heard a howling noise growing louder and louder and then...sand everywhere!

"The North Wind! The North Wind!" Elizabeth said.

"No, it's not," said Becky. "It's the South Wind." (And how she knew this was anyone's guess.)

At that instant, the gelfelchin screamed for all to hear:

"Oh, those children with their miserable wishes! My plants, my herbs, they'll be buried alive. Quick, goblins cover them with your bodies. You'll be rewarded amply."

"But I can't breathe," said one of the visiting goblins.

"And I've got sand in my eyes," another visiting goblin said.

"Enough with your lame excuses," the gelfelchin cried (shoving the goblins onto her plants). "Save my valuable herbs!"

Clink.

Becky heard the lock opening.

She turned and saw Oran standing next to her with a key in his hand. "What are you doing? You're letting us out?"

"Yes," Oran said. "I don't want to be around the gelfelchin anymore. She's a very evil creature. I'm running away, and taking you with me. With all this sand, it's a perfect opportunity to escape without being noticed."

He slid the bars open.

Clunk!

Matthew glared at Oran and made a fist. But he wisely decided this was not the time to pound Oran for locking them up—not with so little time to escape, with Oran being much, *much* larger than himself (two feet five inches taller and fifty-five pounds and three ounces heavier—to be exact).

The Pig Queen grunted and snorted.

"Will you release Her Majesty too, please?" Becky said.

"Yes." Oran unlocked the Pig Queen's cage and helped her royal silky-white body (with a touch of pink and a hint of chartreuse) out, with a great effort on his part.

The Pig Queen bowed her head. "Thank you, young man. I'm in your debt." She then ran to the children who were scrambling out of the stone cage. "May your journey be successful; I'll run and keep the gelfelchin distracted."

The dog barked. "I'll also help keep her preoccupied. She's a wicked master and always kicks me ten feet into the air."

"Me too," the white cat meowed.

"How cute!" the twins exclaimed.

Becky turned to the dog. "I appreciate what you are doing."

She patted his tiny head, and his little tail wagged back and forth.

"Oh," the dog said. "No one has touched me like that before. You are such a kind girl."

"I wish I could take you home with me," Becky said. She then stroked the white cat.

The white cat meowed. "You're so sweet."

"Don't mention it," Becky said.

"I've an idea," the Pig Queen said to the gelfelchin's pets. "Huddle." The animals conferred together and then the dog and white cat said, "Agreed," and ran to the front of the hut with the Pig Queen behind them.

As Becky hurried after Oran, she heard the dog (as he purposefully trampled the gelfelchin's flowerbeds with the gleeful help of the white cat and the Pig Queen):

"The Pig Queen has escaped! The Pig Queen has escaped!"

"What?" the gelfelchin said. "How is that possible?" And then, "My plants! My costly herbs!"

"See how I trample them," the Pig Queen sneered.

"Oh!" the gelfelchin said in a surprised voice.

"Don't think I won't forget your hospitality," the Pig Queen said, running into the forest. "You'll...*snort*...be hearing from my...*snort*... army."

"Do you want us to...*wheeze*...go after the Pig Queen? Bring her back?" the goblins said.

"Wait, what's this smeared on my cat's collar?" the gelfelchin said, and grabbed her cat roughly.

"The Pig Queen...*cough*...do you want us to...oh, this sand... chase her?" the goblins asked again.

"Pie? Pie on the collar of my cat?" the gelfelchin said, ignoring the goblins.

"What?" the goblins said.

"How did you get so much pie on your collar?" the gelfelchin demanded of her cat.

"The children ate some pie and gave me some, too," the white cat replied boldly.

"And how were they able to do that? Wait a minute. Look in the distance! Oran is leading them into the forest. Aaahh!" The gelfelchin tossed the white cat ten feet into the air.

"Meow-ow-ow," the white cat said.

"The Pig Queen...?" the goblins said.

"Forget about that stupid swine!" the gelfelchin yelled. "The children have escaped. Stop them!"

Becky turned her head to see the sand blowing fiercer than ever around the gelfelchin and the goblins. The gelfelchin appeared to be trying to point out to the goblins their location, but instead, all she seemed able to do was wave her hands and scream while the goblins complained that sand was in their eyes, bumped into each other and fell down, crushing the gelfelchin's costly herbs and plants.

On the Right Path

"C'mon," Becky said to the twins, looking here and there, trying to see through all the sand. "We've got to hurry."

Elizabeth squinted her eyes. "I can't see."

"There's too much sand," Mary said, and put her hand over her eyes.

Oran grabbed both of the twins' hands. "Everyone, hold onto one another."

Within moments, he led them out of the sandstorm and into the forest.

"The trail that leads north is nearby," he said, "but we need to keep a safe distance from it. The gelfelchin and goblins will most certainly be on it looking for us as soon as the sand subsides."

"I'm scared," Mary whimpered.

"I'm scared, too!" Jonathan said, in a trembling voice a little like Mary's.

Oran smiled. "Don't be." He opened his jacket to reveal a shiny silver object in a scabbard.

Matthew's eyes grew wide. "The sword. The dwarf's sword."

"I hid it from the gelfelchin when she wasn't looking," Oran said.

"You did?" Matthew said, standing in awe.

"You never showed it to her?" Becky asked.

"Why should I?" Oran asked. Then he hung his head and confessed: "I'm very sorry for telling the goblins where you were. I wanted the jewels the gelfelchin offered. I thought they would keep me warm, and I wasn't thinking about you and your freedom. But the first diamond I received from the gelfelchin made me feel colder instead of warmer, and the more I received, the more I felt cold inside until I realized there was more to life than having lots of jewels to try to keep warm...it was better to be cold and be right than to be warm and be wrong." He continued to stare at the ground. "Can you ever forgive me for what I did?"

"Of course," Becky said without hesitation, although a little confused by his confession.

"I would've done the same," Matthew said. "I think."

Jonathan patted Oran on the shoulder and the twins smiled (as they knew how to do so well when they were around others older than they and they did not have a clue in the world what was going on).

Then Mary did something that *did* seem to suggest that she knew what was going on (or at least paid attention once in a while). She took the ruby from her pocket—the ruby she had taken from the Tree of Balance—and handed it to Oran.

Oran took it with a quizzical look. "For me?"

"It's a ruby from the Tree of Balance," Mary explained. "I took it from the Tree of Balance because it looked pretty."

"I knew it!" Matthew said, his eyes widening with delight because now he could taunt his sister (which he would do many times over and sometimes under) with a reason behind it (unlike the many, many other times he taunted her).

"Shh, Matthew," Becky said.

"You're giving this ruby to me?" Oran said, cradling the magnificent jewel in his hand.

"Yes," Mary said, and bowed her head. "I got everyone in trouble because of it. Maybe it will keep you warm. Please take it."

Elizabeth patted Mary on the back.

Becky grabbed Mary and hugged her. "Oh, Mary, you told the truth...for once."

"Yeah, for once!" Matthew piped in.

Becky elbowed Matthew to be quiet.

"To me. You're giving the ruby to me," Oran said, and held the ruby tight in his hands. (And it seemed that tears were welling up in his eyes.) "I've never been given anything by humans before. I didn't know they could be so kind."

"Well, uh, we can..." Becky muttered, totally confused by what Oran was talking about.

"You'll never be forgotten," Oran said to Mary, and rubbed her hair. He looked at the others, his face beaming. "I'll never forget any of you."

And there was more general confusion on top of what he meant by, "I didn't know humans could be so kind," and now this, "I'll never forget any of you." But the children dismissed his talk as just what a weird-sort-of-young-man-who-needed-jewels-to-keep-warm kind of guy might say.

"Now come," Oran said, placing the gem in his pocket. "We can't stay here any longer. The gelfelchin will find us. We need to continue to the northern regions of the land."

(No confusion here.)

They started off, but a snapping of a branch caused them to halt. Becky's heart beat faster.

"Wha—what was that?" Jonathan said.

Oran motioned for the others to be quiet.

"We need to get out of this forest," he whispered. "There may be goblins and other lowlife fairy creatures lurking about. This way." He headed toward an opening in the trees that led to a small field. "We should be safe on the other side," he said. "The squirrels will keep a lookout for us. They're my friends."

They hurried across the meadow. Becky looked both ways, hoping not to see a goblin (or the gelfelchin) running after them.

"Almost there," Oran said.

"What's that noise?" Becky said. "Do you hear it? At the edge of this field."

"Yes, I hear it too," Matthew said.

"It's nothing to worry about," Oran said.

They came to the end of the field and stopped.

Before them a raging river wildly dashed and crashed against jagged rocks, making it impossible to cross.

"Uh," Becky said.

"This is not good," Jonathan said.

Becky looked in both directions. "It's too wide. I don't see any way to go over."

"These will help," Oran told her, pulling out several twigs from his pocket.

Jonathan and Matthew looked at the twigs and then at each other. (Oran had lost his mind!)

"Those twigs?" Becky said. "How are those going to help?"

"Watch," Oran said, and tossed them one at a time into the raging river.

Becky followed the sticks. They grew larger and larger until they turned into huge logs and formed a dam. "I don't believe it. How did you do that?"

Oran did not reply.

"I know," Matthew said. "Those were magic sticks, weren't they, Oran? You stole them from the gelfelchin, didn't you? What else did you steal from the gelfelchin?" (Eager to see if there was anything else to help them...or rather...something he could have.)

"Nothing," Oran said. "Those were my sticks."

Without further explanation, he hurried down the riverbank. Becky, Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins followed him around the log dam and then to the other side.

"We'll be safe in here," he said as he led them into the woods.

Becky noticed a more than usual bustling activity among the squirrels in the trees. Several large five-foot brown squirrels scampered down a huge oak and drew near to Oran.

"Whoa," said the twins. "Look at that!"

"Oran," the large five-foot brown squirrels said. "Greetings. We haven't seen you in a long time. What are you doing? Exploring? Gathering sticks?"

"We're running away from the gelfelchin," Oran said. "Can you send some of your scouts to see if she or any of her lowlife cronies are on the path that leads north?"

The large five-foot brown squirrels saluted. "Wait here, we'll find out."

They headed back up the tree. Becky heard loud chattering in the branches that appeared to radiate...a chatter here, a chatter there, and then over there and then way, way over there. Finally, the chattering returned in the same direction it had gone out. The large five-foot brown squirrels came back down the tree.

"Good news and bad news," they said. "The good news is the trail to the north is clear, with no worthless creature lurking behind a tree or a bush. The bad news is the gelfelchin and a band of goblins have taken the underground river to the northern regions of our land to head you off. She has sent instructions for the rest of the goblins to meet her there."

Oran frowned. "I was afraid that might happen."

Jonathan threw his hands up. "Great, just great...we're doomed..."

Becky ignored Jonathan (a lot of ignoring going on, isn't there?) and asked the large five-foot brown squirrels with great curiosity, "Underground river? What underground river?"

"The Fairy River," the large five-foot brown squirrels said. "It travels from the center of this land to a northern mountain range."

"Is there more than one underground river in this land?"

"Only one," they said.

"And how do you get to it?" Becky asked.

"It can be reached in two places," the large five-foot brown squirrels replied. "In a small cove near the gelfelchin's hut and an opening out of a hill near the home of the North Wind."

Becky turned to Oran with great excitement. "If that is the only underground river, then the Tree of Balance went north on it. We may find it at its northernmost opening."

"Perhaps," Oran said in a state of thought.

"But what if it came out near the gelfelchin's hut?" Matthew said, making a face. "Remember, the Tree of Balance changed shape...maybe a bunny or something else. How do we know it didn't pop out of the small cove near the gelfelchin's hut? It might be in this forest as we speak."

"Perhaps," Oran said again. "But we really don't know if it is or not, do we? Right now, our best hope is to continue to the northern regions of this land and begin looking for it there. In fact, I think we should contact the North Wind first and see if he knows its whereabouts. He's good about knowing what goes on around his mountain lair. He'll know if the Tree of Balance is in his territory or not."

"How far is the North Wind?" Becky said.

"Yes, how far?" Jonathan said (being rather tired after all the exercise they had been getting, when his only normal exercise was lifting his arm to eat a jelly doughnut).

"Not far," Oran said. "At the top of the next hill, we should be able to see his mountain lair in the distance."

"Really?" Becky asked.

The twins began to chase one of the large five-foot brown squirrels around the tree.

"Yes, and if we hurry, we may be able to get to the North Wind before the gelfelchin can block us off," Oran said.

"And if we don't?" Becky said.

Oran put his hand on the dwarf's sword and looked at her with a solemn expression. "We have to fight."

The twins cheered (not for fighting, but for finally catching the large five-foot brown squirrel by the tail).

"We have to fight?" Matthew said. His eyes began to shine. "This is exciting. Give me the sword." He put out his hands.

Becky pushed Matthew's hands out of the way. "No, Matthew. Oran did not say there's going to be a battle. He said there might be."

"I hope there isn't one," Jonathan said. "We're hopelessly outnumbered. Six of us with one sword against a gelfelchin with magic and an army of gob..."

"Don't worry about it," Oran said. "If there's going to be a battle, wee folk will show up to help. They love nothing more than a fight between good and evil."

"Yes!" Matthew said in a loud voice. "I can't wait. Bring on the war!"

The large five-foot brown squirrel squeezed out of the twins' grasp, and the twins joined the conversation:

"We don't have a thing to wear to war. No armor. Nothing."

"There's not going to be a war," Becky said indignantly.

"But just in case, we need something to go with our shoes," the twins said (totally clueless).

Becky rolled her eyes.

"This way," Oran said.

They ran ahead as the squirrels scampered in the trees and jumped from branch to branch. Becky noticed the trees began to change...from fall foliage to bare limbs. At the same time, the air felt colder to her skin. She shivered.

Elizabeth pointed to a white clump on the ground. "Look! Snow."

"There is?" Matthew said. (His face lit up at the opportunity to hit one of his sisters with a snowball.)

"There'll be more," Oran said, as if reading Matthew's mind, and not wanting to stop now for play. "We're going into winter."

"Winter?" Becky said. "But we didn't bring any coats."

"Don't worry," Oran said.

(Becky did not see how...not with the temperature dropping.)

Within minutes, they were on the trail to the northern regions of the underground land and heading toward the hill where they could see the mountain lair of the North Wind. As they did, Matthew could not resist saying:

"What I don't understand is how we can be so close to where we touched the Tree of Balance. You'd think the northern regions of this land would be a great distance from where we started, but it doesn't seem we've gone more than a few miles." (He also wanted to say, "Why, if we only went down a flight of stairs to arrive at this land, hasn't it been discovered by men digging deepwater wells or drilling for oil?" But he figured the answer to his first question would be enough.)

"The geography in this underground land is different from what you're used to," Oran answered. "It's as long and wide as you want and as short and narrow as you need."

Matthew had a confused look. "Which means?"

(The twins quickly rushed over to a clump of snow and started to make a snowball.)

"You're farther from where you first discovered the Tree of Balance than you think. The terrain in this underground land has changed and carried you with it as you've traveled through it, that's all."

"Nuh-uh," Matthew returned defiantly.

"Yes," the twins said, and hit Matthew in the head with a snowball, causing him to sprawl back.

"So we're many miles from where we started our journey?" Becky asked.

"You twins!" Matthew said, red-faced, and chased after them.

"Yes," the young man said.

"Matthew, stop bothering the twins," Becky said.

Matthew's eyes widened. "Wha? I didn't...ah, never mind..." He glared at the twins.

Jonathan stared at Oran, panting (for he was very much tired). "I hope the terrain will carry us with it back as well?" He looked longingly back toward the direction home was, or where he thought it was (with all the terrain changing and what not).

"That would be nice," Oran said. "But if not, don't worry."

(He seemed to Becky always to be saying, "Don't worry.")

Before too long, Becky could see the path going up a tall mound. "Is that it? Is that the hill you were talking about?"

"Yes," Oran said.

"At the top we'll be able to see where the North Wind lives?"

"Yes."

Becky felt her heart beating faster again. The journey to the northern regions of this bizarre underground land would soon be over (hallelujah!). "Oh, I hope the North Wind knows where the tree is," she said. "The sooner we find the tree, the quicker we can go home."

"And eat," Jonathan added.

"And I hope the tree has changed into something small so we can carry it back," Mary added (and why she did is puzzling, since she had had such a careless attitude about finding the Tree of Balance the entire trip).

Oran stared into the forest on either side of the path. He slowed his pace as he approached the hill.

"What's wrong?" Becky said. "You seem worried."

"Something's up."

"Yes, we can see that the sky is up," Matthew said.

The twins giggled.

Becky frowned. "Matthew, hush...what is it, Oran?"

Oran stopped. "We have visitors."

"We do?" Becky looked around.

"Over there." Oran pointed to a clump of snow-covered bushes.

Becky squinted hard into the bushes to spot a fairy, an elf, or a creature that resembled any of the wee folk hiding in the foliage, but she could not make out anything. "Are you sure?"

"Behind them."

Everyone looked this time. At that moment, something moved... something like the tips of pointed hats.

"Come out," Oran said in a loud voice. "We know you're behind those bushes."

The objects stirred slightly, and then out walked a group of strange wee little men with paper helmets and wooden swords. (How they all fit behind this bush was beyond the children's grasp, for there were so many of them.)

Matthew raised his eyebrows. "Hey! I know these people. They jumped up and down and caused the logs that blocked a path to fall down so I could get out of a rocky crevice."

The wee little men drew near to Matthew, and bowed low to the ground. "Hello, you fed us. We've come to fight with you."

"Fight?" Becky said with a surprised look. "No, you're mistaken."

"For Matthew and our land." The wee little men waved their swords and held them up in the air.

With a smug look, Matthew lifted his hand as a general would do to assemble his troops.

"Uh," Becky said to Oran. "What's going on?"

"Let's go to the top of the hill and see," Oran said.

They hurried to the summit. Below them, the trail continued off into the distance to a snow-covered mountain. Pine forests lined both sides. A river flowed out of the bottom of the hill and twisted and turned until it split into two branches that headed toward far-away mountain ranges.

Oran shook his head. "It's what I was afraid of." He pointed to a snow-covered mountain. "That," he said, "is the mountain lair of the

North Wind. And..." He paused. "There...on the trail near the home of the North Wind...that large moving speck. Do you see it? It's the gelfelchin and her army of goblins."

"No!" Becky said.

"Aah! Gob...gob...gob..." Jonathan said.

"I'm afraid so," Oran said. "It's as I suspected. They've blocked our way to the North Wind. If you wish to finish your quest, you must fight."

Matthew clapped his hands. "Yes! It's battle time."

The twins clapped too (unaware of what was going on).

The wee little men waved their tiny swords. "For Matthew and our land." They let out a cheer.

"No! I won't hear of it," Becky said. "There must be another way to the North Wind."

"Y-yes...there must be..." Jonathan stammered.

"The terrain on either side of the path is treacherous," Oran said. "The temperature is well below freezing. The ground is iced over. You'll never make it unless you keep to the trail, which is kept warm by underground hot springs. It's time for war."

"Yes!" Matthew said.

Becky felt like crying. "No! I don't want to fight."

"Me neither!" Jonathan said (actually showing tears).

"Don't worry," Matthew said, pounding his fists. "I'll protect you."

"And so will we," a familiar voice said, coming up the hill.

Becky turned. Before her, an army of pigs with helmets led by the Pig Queen marched toward her.

"Yay!" the twins said (what a great playtime this was turning out to be).

"The gelfelchin has it coming to her," the Pig Queen growled. "I can't wait."

"Um, uh," Becky said. "How did you get here so fast?"

The Pig Queen smiled. "Time is what you make of it, dear."

"Uh..."

"All hail King Stinkpot," another voice cried out.
Jonathan immediately stopped his whining.
A sign popped out of the ground with Jonathan's picture on it.
It read:

King Stinkpot

The Stinkiest Stinkpot of All

"Hey," Jonathan said, annoyed.

"Hey back," a voice answered. A roly-poly man came out of the forest and up to Jonathan. "The citizens of Stinkpot Village are at your service," he said and bowed low.

"I'm not your King," Jonathan said, turning red.

"Our sign says different," the roly-poly man said (carefree and happy to be with his king).

"But you made it!" Jonathan said angrily.

Matthew laughed at Jonathan's misfortune.

"Are you able to fight?" Oran asked the roly-poly man.

"Yes," the roly-poly man said with a salute. "Me and the citizens of Stinkpot Village."

"How?" Jonathan said. "By declaring that this goblin is a stinkpot or that goblin is a stinkpot?"

The roly-poly man bowed. "Is that what you wish, O King? So be it."

"No, I..."

At that moment, wails and shrieks came from the back of the pig army. Becky made out what appeared to be...yes, it was...most definitely...a ghost heading in their direction.

"It's the spook from the haunted house," Mary said. "Look, Elizabeth, I wonder if it wants to pretend to have tea again."

"Oh, splendid," Elizabeth said.

Becky felt uneasy. What was a ghost doing here? Her knees shook a little.

The ghost drew near and hovered next to the twins. He bowed to Oran. "It would give me great honor to *fright* alongside those who deceived me and destroyed my home."

"Fright?" Becky stammered. "You mean 'fight'?"

The ghost smiled at the twins. "Not with these two little terrors. Their sheer destructiveness alone is enough to scare the enemy away. I wish to learn from these greats."

The twins blushed. "You're too kind."

Becky was confused. A ghost, a bunch of pigs, wee little men with wooden swords and paper hats...what type of army was this to fight a battle against goblins and the gelfelchin?

"We're doomed," she said, and sat on the ground.

Jonathan joined Becky. "Yep," he said, eyeing his army of stinkpots.

Oran drew the dwarf's sword out of its scabbard and handed it to Matthew. "You may have the honor of *possibly* killing the gelfelchin."

"All right!" Matthew took the sword and held it up high with a broad smile. And when he did this, the wee little men cheered again. "For Matthew and our land!"

"Oran," Becky said, standing up, begging. "I don't want Matthew to fight."

"It's for your protection," Oran said. "The dwarf gave the weapon to you, not to me." He turned and faced the enemy. "Let's move out."

The army roared and cheered.

"Matthew, please be careful," Becky said.

"Don't worry," Matthew said, smiling. (And then he did something rather surprising...he gave Becky a hug.)

The Gelfelchin's Last Battle

The bizarre army went slowly down the hill. As they did, Oran asked the children in passing (if such a thing as asking something in passing was possible when going to war):

"What are your favorite gems?"

"What?" Becky said. "You want to know that now? At this time?"

"If something happens to me, I'll regret not asking."

Becky did not understand this odd question, but she said:

"Diamonds."

"Emeralds," Elizabeth said.

"Opals," Matthew replied.

"Uh...sapphires," Jonathan said. In front of the Pig Queen, he wasn't going to mention pearls.

"And rubies are your favorite, right, Mary?" Oran said.

Mary smiled.

The Pig Queen came alongside Becky and said:

"Before we fight, I think apologies are in order."

The small pig that had initially mistaken Becky for a pig approached her with its head to the ground. "You made a lovely queen," he said. "We were sorry to see you go."

"Ahem," the Pig Queen said.

The small pig seemed hesitant to speak further.

"Perhaps you would like me to sit on you and lecture you again on what manners really are?" the Pig Queen suggested.

The small pig gave a loud squeal: "No! Please! Anything but that." He quickly turned to Becky. "I'm sorry! Really! Please! On behalf of the entire colony, all of us were dreadfully wrong to have made you a pig slave. We won't do it again...to you or to anyone else who happens to drop in on us."

The Pig Queen nodded. "That's better."

The small pig gave a cursory glance at Becky to see whether she forgave them. Becky bent down and patted his head. "Apology accepted."

"Now, be off with you," the Pig Queen ordered. "To the front of the line."

The small pig obeyed (and squealed) without hesitation.

As the band approached the lair of the North Wind, Becky could see a multitude of goblins blocking the way to the North Wind. The gelfelchin stood on a large rock. She called out:

"Give it up, Oran. You're hopelessly outnumbered. The goblins will tear you to pieces."

"I'm outta here." Jonathan attempted to go the back of the line, but he could not get by with all the people.

"Never," Oran said.

"Don't be a fool," the gelfelchin said. "Surrender the tree-killers. It's them I want, not you."

"Not without a fight."

"Really, we don't have to fight," Jonathan said, eyeing the goblins.

"Then you'll die with them," the gelfelchin sneered.

Oran's eyes flared. "So be it."

The pigs' hair bristled with excitement. The ghost let out a wail. The wee little men of the rocky crevice waved their toy swords. The goblins raised their voices with a loud shout.

"It'll be a short battle, my friends," the gelfelchin cried out to the goblins. "Remember, you'll be paid handsomely."

Oran turned to the children. "Don't leave this spot. We'll try to divide their army into two. When you see a path through the battlefield, run as fast as you can to a vine-covered ledge not far from where the gelfelchin is standing. Climb up to the lair of the North Wind. We'll keep the gelfelchin from following you."

"But I thought we were going to fight," Matthew said indignantly.

"Humans are not allowed to battle those who live in this underground land," Oran said. "But if goblins or the gelfelchin approach you to do you harm, you are allowed by the rules of this land to chop their heads off."

"All right," Matthew said.

"I'm scared," Becky said, and clutched Oran.

Oran got down to Becky's eye level and smiled. "Don't be. Remember...in this land, every story has a happy ending." He then stood up, turned, faced the enemy, and let out a mighty yell:

"Let the war begin!"

The two armies rushed toward one another and met with grunts, yells, and thunderous noises.

The little pigs were the first line of defense. The greedy goblins grabbed them and were going to swallow them whole, but as they lifted them to their fangs, the larger pigs butted their green stomachs with their helmets so that the little pigs were tossed high into the air. The little pigs fell to the ground and ran off squealing to high heaven. The remaining goblins, not learning from their fellow goblins' mistake, chased after the little pigs.

"Yum, fresh pork," they drooled. "Come to us, come to our greedy mouths."

The little pigs ran to the Pig Queen. "This way," the Pig Queen snorted. "That way." The little pigs ran off, escaping the goblins. However, several little pigs, not hearing the Pig Queen for all the noise, ran up to Becky and looked at her with expectant eyes. "Oh, very

well," Becky said after they had stared at her for the longest time. "This way," she snorted. "That way." The little pigs ran off, drawing many goblins away from the battle.

"Leave the little pigs alone," the gelfelchin screamed, kicking a large pig away from her ten feet into the air.

The goblins did not hear her because of all the grunts and squeals. They chased the little pigs to the forest and quickly found themselves pelted by a rain of acorns from an angry mob of militant squirrels, mother and father squirrels, and a playful blue-furred squirrel.

The squirrels chattered. "Be off, filthy, dirty goblins."

"I rather like this game!" the blue-furred squirrel said, knocking down a goblin with an acorn.

"Ow," the goblin said.

The blue-furred squirrel grabbed for another acorn, but lost its balance and fell from the tree. Matthew hurried to its rescue, waving his sword back and forth at the goblins. "No fair," the goblins said. "Humans can't fight." "If you come near, I'll chop off your heads," Matthew said. The blue-furred squirrel ran back up the tree and continued to throw acorns with the other squirrels.

"Ow, ow, ow," the goblins said, and ran away with their arms over their heads.

"Fools!" the gelfelchin said. "I told you not to follow those little pigs into the forest!" She muttered a few words and clapped her hands. Instantly, the trees were covered with a silken web to stop all acorn assaults.

The wee little men of the rocky crevice hopped up and down and waved their swords. "Evil goblins, prepare to be whacked."

Several goblins encircled them. "Small, frail souls," they growled. "You're as good as dead."

"We aren't dead," the wee little men replied. They hit the goblins' hands.

Whack!

"Take that and that and that."

Whack! Whack! Whack!

The goblins momentarily stunned by the pain from being whacked and whacked hard, suddenly let out a yelp and ran off, holding their hands.

"Fools!" the gelfelchin said. "They're just wooden blades." She waved her hands. The toy weapons turned to heavy lead.

The wee little men dropped them with a shriek. "No. Not our beautiful swords."

While this was going on, a few goblins ran into signs that popped up in their path.

Sproing!

The signs read:

Goblins who battle a lot are nothing but Goblin Stinky Pots

"No, we're not stinky pots," the goblins cried.

A large sign sprang up near Jonathan with his picture on it as King Stinkpot: *Yes, You are Goblin Stinky Pots!* "Hey!" Jonathan said. The goblins (along with Jonathan) tried to pull out the signs, but failed in their attempts.

The gelfelchin muttered a few words. The posters exploded into sawdust. "There," she said to the goblins. "The signs are gone. Keep fighting."

The ghost flew overhead rattling chains. "I'm the ghost of your grandfather," he lied to the goblins. "I'm the spirit of your great-grandmother."

"No, go away, don't haunt us," the goblins said.

The gelfelchin conjured up a glistening blue ball of goo and threw it at the ghost. The blue goo hit his body (as if he had one), covered him and hardened on the spot. The ghost fell to the ground.

Thump!

Two goblins ran past the twins, wearing red body armor against their green goblin bodies. "Where did you get those lovely red outfits?" the twins said. The goblins stopped. "You like?" "No!" several large pigs said and trampled the goblins into the ground. *Squish!*

Oran moved in and out of the battling horde, throwing sticks. "Here, goblins, catch!"

"Aaahh," the goblins said, surprised to see...not twigs...but logs heading in their direction.

The gelfelchin turned this way and that to stop the heavy logs from reaching their targets, but she could not stop all of them. Many logs fell on the goblins.

Crunch!

The goblins groaned. "We're being defeated."

"No, you aren't," the gelfelchin said. "I'll turn the entire lot of them into small forest animals. Catch them all and eat them." She lifted her hands high into the air but suddenly cried out, "NO!"

Becky turned to see what she was yelling about. Above her, for as far as she could see, multitudes on multitudes (jillions on gazillions) of fairies flew toward the gelfelchin led by a very large fairy with an angry face (a fairy that had a remarkable resemblance to the angel in the sculpture garden). "I can't believe it!"

"Wow," Matthew said.

The twins stood mesmerized by the whole affair.

"It is finished," the large fairy said to the gelfelchin. "Surrender."

"Never," the gelfelchin said. She turned to the goblins. "Attack!"

"How?" the goblins said nervously. "We can't fly. There are too many of them. We're outnumbered."

"Lay down your claws, you foul goblins," the large fairy said in a loud voice, waving a large orb. "Your war is unjust."

"What do you mean?" the goblins said.

"You've been led to battle thinking these children destroyed the Tree of Balance," the large fairy said. "It's a lie. The Tree of Balance lives!"

"What?" The goblins looked at one another.

"These children merely touched the Tree of Balance and freed it. I know, for it happened in my territory. The children went to the northern regions of our land to find the Tree of Balance to return it, but the gelfelchin put a bounty on their heads even when she *knew* they were innocent. She has deceived you."

"No, it's not true!" the goblins said loudly. "This is not so!"

They turned to the gelfelchin, who took a *small* step back (a small step, mind you, as she was still standing on a large rock).

"The gelfelchin brought these children to our land by a magic book," the large fairy said. "One she placed in their public library. A crow came by and told me he saw her do it."

The gelfelchin took another small step back.

The goblins stared at the gelfelchin with their green, beady eyes. "Is this true? Is this for real?"

"No." The gelfelchin frowned.

"Yes," the large fairy said, hovering near the goblins. "It's true. The crow *also* saw the children carrying this magic book with them when they passed through my territory."

The gelfelchin took yet another small step back.

"Show us this magic book!" the goblins demanded.

The large fairy turned to Becky. "Do you have the fairy picture book you checked out of your public library?"

"Yes," Becky answered. She took out the fairy picture book from her oversized pants pocket. "Here it is."

"Bring it, child, and give it to the goblins. Don't be frightened."

Becky walked to the goblins. She felt her legs trembling. She slowly handed the fairy picture book to the goblins' waiting dreadful claws.

At the same time, Matthew clenched the hilt of the sword just in case.

The goblins took the fairy picture book from her, and turned the pages. "This is it? This is the gelfelchin's magic book? All these pages are blank. How do we know the gelfelchin wrote this?"

"Use your sacred goblin spell. You'll know that I'm not lying," the large fairy said.

The goblins held up the fairy picture book and muttered:

Glow book,

Glow and go,

Go to your rightful owner,

Go, go, go!

Suddenly, the fairy picture book glowed an eerie green. Then, in a flash of green and silver sparkles, the book lifted itself into the air and floated toward the gelfelchin.

The gelfelchin put her hands up. "No! It's not mine, I tell you."

"The book. It's heading toward its rightful owner," the goblins said. "Magic books always do. They never lie! The large fairy is telling us the truth. The gelfelchin is its author."

"That's right," the large fairy said. "The children could not have come to our land without the help of a magic book. The gelfelchin has misled you."

The gelfelchin took one more small step back and fell off the large rock. "Oh!" she said (but no one cared).

The goblins grumbled against the fallen gelfelchin: "You've led us astray to capture innocent blood. For what reason? Why would you want us to do something like that? Without the power of the Tree of Balance, none of us could ever go back to the human world. Why would you want to trap us all?"

The gelfelchin frowned even harder.

Oran gestured to Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins to follow him. He took Becky's hand. "This way," he whispered.

Becky followed with her head turned to see what would happen.

"I'll tell you why the gelfelchin wanted to prevent anyone from ever leaving our land," the large fairy said. "Her ambition all along has been to be more evil than any worthless creature in all our land's history...to be the most wicked of them all." She glared at the gelfelchin. "But nothing she did helped her achieve this status, none of her magic tricks, none of her spells...nothing." She floated toward the gelfelchin, who stood up in a defiant manner. "So she decided to do something that no other evil wee folk would ever dare to do, something none of us would ever think of doing." She pointed an accusing finger at the gelfelchin. "Imprison everyone in our land, including herself! And make sure that none of us ever ate a piece of candy again!"

"The nerve!" the goblins said. They stared at the gelfelchin. "Is that so?"

The gelfelchin sneered.

"It is, isn't it?" the goblins said. "You were going to make us destroy the children so they could never return the Tree of Balance and none of us could ever eat candy or revisit the human world? You were going to make us help you ruin our land forever for your own glory? How dare...how dare you do this to us and to everyone in our land, and make us participants in your evil deed! You must be destroyed!"

They started toward the gelfelchin with their claws outstretched.

The gelfelchin raised her hands. "Stay away! Don't even think it." She muttered a series of magic words and threw her hands toward the ground.

The dirt started to tremble.

The goblins struggled to keep their balance. "What's happening?"

"Look," one goblin said. "The earth is cracking."

The goblins fell back in horror.

The crack grew larger and larger until it formed a giant ravine separating the gelfelchin from the armies. A red molten liquid filled

the empty space and cast a reddish hue on the gelfelchin's smug expression.

She cackled. "Like what you see?"

"It's lava!" the pigs squealed.

"Try to kill me now, fools," the gelfelchin said.

"Go after her," the large fairy commanded her fairy army (or, rather, air force).

The fairy army despaired. "It's impossible. We're unable to cross, our wings will wilt in the heat."

The gelfelchin mocked them all:

"And you thought you could defeat me! Idiots! All of you! My magic is far too powerful, I'm better than all of you...put together!"

"Don't think you've gotten away with this," the large fairy said. "There's no place for you to hide. You'll eventually have to come back over. There's no escape for you. You might as well give up now."

"Not on your life." The gelfelchin put her head back and laughed and laughed and laughed.

Oran had managed to get the children up to the top of a thirty-foot ledge overhung with vines. The last one he brought up was Elizabeth, but when he reached for her, her foot knocked against a loose rock and caused it to fall to the ground with a loud *kerplunk!*

The gelfelchin turned at the sound. "What? What's that noise? The children? The children are on this side of the lava with me? Hahaaa—hostages!" She clapped her hands. "Yes! Victory is mine!"

"No, please!" the large fairy begged. "The children are innocent. Leave them alone."

"Quiet, fool," the gelfelchin snarled.

Elizabeth, still dangling, made a slight whimpering sound.

Oran grabbed her. "Don't worry, I've got you."

"That's right, give her false comfort," the gelfelchin growled. "But you won't be able to save her...not now, not ever. Her fate is

secured, along with the rest. I'm going to turn them all into rocks and throw them into the lava."

She hurried to the ledge, and, as she did, sharp claws protruded from her hands, her feet became hooves, wings jutted out of her back, and her face took on the expression of an evil witch.

Becky gasped. "She's a hideous monster!"

Oran pushed Elizabeth to safety and then climbed to where the others stood. He stared at the gelfelchin, who began to climb up the side, using the thickest vine.

She stared back with red eyes and bared rather sharp teeth, muttering and mumbling curses under her breath.

"Quick," Oran said to Matthew. "The dwarf's sword, give it to me."

Matthew handed it to him.

Oran took it and held it up high. "Don't go any farther!" he ordered the gelfelchin.

The gelfelchin scoffed. "Go ahead, cut the vine. There's plenty more where that came from. I'll scale the stones if I have to."

Oran hit the vine with the weapon, but the blade did not slice through it. It barely made a dent. He hit it again and again, but it did not cut deeply enough.

The gelfelchin climbed closer.

Whack!

Closer.

Whack!

Closer.

"Oran, she's almost at the top," Elizabeth said.

"You'll never be able to cut through that vine in time," Matthew said.

A slight breeze blew past Becky's face. As she felt it, she suddenly remembered something that might help to stall the gelfelchin. "Yes," she said, and grabbed the twins' hands. "Jonathan, take the twins. Go behind that large rock over there."

Jonathan trembled. "B-but the gelfelchin will find us there! We'll be tra-a-apped!" he said, almost to tears.

"Just do it," Becky said. "We don't have much time."

Matthew, impatient at Jonathan's cowardice, snapped, "Here, I'll do it," and took the twins' hands (and in an instant, a bond occurred between them...not much...but it was a beginning) and ran behind a boulder. Jonathan wailed, "No! Stop! I'll..." and finally ran behind the boulder himself.

"I know how to keep the gelfelchin from reaching the top," Becky said to Oran. She turned around three times, jumped up and down, wrinkled her face, and cackled like a hen.

"What are you doing?" Oran asked incredulously.

"Something I should have done at the gelfelchin's hut," Becky said. And then...she threw out her arms and *shouted* at the top of her lungs:

Come North Wind,

Come and blow,

Come North Wind,

Blow, blow, blow.

"No!" the gelfelchin said, her glowing red eyes widening. "Don't say that!"

"Too late," Becky said.

The wind began to blow, slowly at first, but then faster and stronger. Becky ran to be with her brothers and sisters while Oran continued to chop.

Whack!

The gelfelchin tried to climb, but found that she was unable. The North Wind knocked against her so hard that all she could do was hold onto her vine for dear life.

Whack!

From a nearby tree, a crow cawed from a waving branch in mocking tones:

"No place to go, no place to hide."

Whack!

"It's over," Oran said to the gelfelchin as he struggled to raise the dwarf's sword even higher to cut the last strand on the vine.

"No!" the gelfelchin shouted. "Don't do it. I made a man of you, remember? Don't you know what will happen to you if I fall to my death?"

"Yes, I do," Oran shouted back. He took aim. "But I'd rather be what I was, than what I've been with you."

He let the blade fall.

Shwoooooosh!

Chop!

The vine the gelfelchin held in her hand was cut into two.

"No!" the gelfelchin screamed as she fell toward the ground. But she didn't fall straight down and hit the dirt. Instead, the North Wind carried her over the lava and dropped her. She had time only to shriek one last "NOOOooooo!" before plunging into the molten rock.

Splash!

Fizz!

Silence.

The Tree of Balance

There was a brief pause among the wee folk, and then a huge shout:

“The evil gelfelchin is gone forever!”

A cheer went out among the goblins, the wee little men, the pigs, the Stinkpot Villagers, the ghost, the squirrels, and the jillions on gazillions of fairies. Becky, Jonathan, Matthew, and the twins ran out from behind the rock and saw bubbles in the lava where the gelfelchin had sunk. Oran stood still.

Becky touched Oran’s arm. “You saved our lives.”

Oran did not reply.

“Look,” Jonathan pointed out. “The lava river is closing.”

“The gelfelchin’s magic has been destroyed,” the large fairy said. “Everything she’s changed by her mixed-up sorcery will now return to its former shape.”

Another cheer went out at this statement.

At that moment, Mary let out a scream:

“Oran, what’s wrong with you?”

Becky turned. To her astonishment, Oran grew slightly taller; his arms extended outward and upward, his fingers even more. His hair bushed out and covered his limbs. His body became stiff, and his clothes melted and hardened again to a rocky texture with many colors.

"Oran," Becky said, trembling. "What's going on?"

"I've set you free," Oran said, flashing a smile. "That's what. You'll soon be able to go home. I purposely killed the gelfelchin at the home of the North Wind so he could carry me back, you won't have to do it."

"What?"

"Good-bye," Oran said. "I'll never forget any of you."

Suddenly, a dazzling blue light shot out of Oran's entire being and momentarily blinded the children.

When Becky opened her eyes, she found, not Oran, but a magnificent jeweled tree in his place. "No," she said, believing it to be impossible.

"The Tree of Balance," Matthew said excitedly. "It's the Tree of Balance."

"Yes," Jonathan said. "Oran...Oran was the Tree of Balance."

Becky stared at the tree. "Oran?"

The tree did not respond.

"Oran? Are you in there? Oran? Say something. Oran?"

Nothing.

Back to the Beginning

Jonathan shook his head. "I can't believe it. Oran was the Tree of Balance all along."

"He sacrificed himself for our sake," Matthew said.

Becky felt her eyes watering.

The large fairy flew near the Harrington children. "With the gel-felchin destroyed, you children are no longer obligated to return the Tree of Balance. The North Wind will carry the tree back. Please step away."

"So soon?" Becky said. "Can't we at least have some time to say 'good-bye'?"

"Please step away."

Becky grabbed the twins' hands and moved a few feet from the tree.

Elizabeth started to ask, "Are we ever going to see Oran again?" but instead she said (and why, no one knows, no one cares), "I'll never suck my thumb again, and that's a promise."

Becky found herself saying, "Good girl, Elizabeth."

Then Jonathan blurted out, "I've been such a big baby all along and wimped out on you on this ledge. I'm really sorry."

Matthew answered, "That's okay. Don't forget, you were really brave at the pigpen."

"Thank you." Jonathan stood up straighter than he ever had and even sucked in his belly a little.

And then Mary tugged on Becky's arm, and asked the same question that had been on Elizabeth's mind (they were identical twins, you know):

"Are we ever going to see Oran again?"

Becky turned to the large fairy for the answer, but the large fairy did not speak. For suddenly the North Wind blew hard, and the Tree of Balance, the fairies, the squirrels, the ghost, the Stinkpot Villagers, the pigs, the wee little men, the goblins, and everything else surrounding them vanished. In the blink of an eye, the children found themselves at the foot of the stairs leading up to the field behind their small house.

Becky looked around. "We're back!"

"And so is the underground paradise," Jonathan said (and not a word about what it was made of).

"It's as if it's never gone away," Matthew said.

At that moment, a light flashed in Becky's face. She squinted. "Oran is back, too. Come, let's say good-bye."

"Do you think he'll hear us when we talk to him?" Matthew said. "After all, he's a tree now."

"He's an enchanted tree," Becky said. "He'll know what we're saying. Besides, we have an obligation to do it. He saved our lives. And we didn't have a chance to thank him for what he did for us."

The children went up and over the hill to the Tree of Balance. It stood in the same spot where they had first seen it, surrounded by a diamond fence with a small sign near its trunk:

The Tree of Balance

Warning

Look...Don't Touch

Becky approached the Tree of Balance, but not too close. "Oran?"

The Tree of Balance did not respond.

"Oran?" Becky said again.

The Tree of Balance did not move.

"I told you," Matthew said. "He can't hear you."

Becky stared. "Oran?"

Nothing.

After a long pause, Becky bit her lip to keep from crying. "I guess Matthew's right; the Tree of Balance must not be able to hear us. Now, we'll never be able to say, 'Good-bye.'"

"Wait," Mary said. "I see something moving."

"What? You didn't touch the tree again, did you?"

"No!" Mary said. "Look."

The Tree of Balance trembled.

"What's going on?" Becky said.

A large branch extended toward the children.

Becky stepped back nervously. "Don't let it touch you."

The branch shook, and five jewels fell from it to the ground in front of Becky.

She stared and stared at the gems until her eyes bulged out (or so it seemed). Suddenly, in a moment of realization, she proclaimed, "Oh! Remember when Oran asked us what our favorite gems were, on our way to battle the gelfelchin? Here they all are." She bent down and picked them up. "See? A sapphire for Jonathan, an emerald for Elizabeth, an opal for Matthew, a diamond for me, and..." She looked at Mary, "the ruby Mary gave Oran to keep him warm." She stood up and smiled at the Tree of Balance. "Oran does know we're here! He does understand us!"

The Tree of Balance trembled as if to say, "Yes."

And with that reassurance, and with tears in her eyes, Becky blew Oran a grateful good-bye kiss, and then turned and ran back to the stairs with Matthew, Jonathan, Elizabeth, and Mary and up to the field behind their house.

The large rock swung back over the hole and never opened again.

And Becky (happily ever after) never did get fined for the picture book.

978-0-595-35553-2
0-595-35553-6