



The Adventures Of Phil & Dotty

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& Kim Swain

Illustrations by Kris Guerra

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Chapter 1

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**This book is dedicated to:
people who stutter.**

Click... Clock... Tick... Tock... Click... Ring... Ring! A bright, cheery voice rang out from the alarm clock, “It’s time to wake up!”

Phil rolled over, grunted, and pulled the bed covers over his head. “Now, Phil, you’ll be late for school. It’s 8 A.M.,” the clock scolded.

Phil rolled out of bed slowly, dragged himself to the front of his dresser, and peered into the mirror. A sleepy face topped by tousled auburn locks stared back at him. But then he was distracted by the reflection of his latest drawings that were hanging on the opposite wall. As he gazed at them, a smile crossed his face. The artwork -- which covered almost every inch of the room -- was a testament to his talent. It’s undeniably true: Phil was happiest when he was drawing. *My teacher says I am an awesome artist. Why can’t I just stay home from school and draw?*

He squinted, rubbed his eyes, and looked directly into the mirror, attempting to block out the world and concentrate. “I-I-I can say words,” Phil stuttered in a soft voice. Then he thought to himself, *It’s not fair that*

talking and reading aloud are so hard for me. It makes people think I'm dumb. I'm always assigned into the lowest reading group, even though I really do know how to read. I hate that!

He looked away from the mirror with pain. Taking a deep breath, he refocused his attention, preparing to practice again.

Phil was so preoccupied he failed to notice a tiny voice calling desperately from outside his bedroom window. "Help! Let me in!" As the cry grew louder and louder Phil rushed to the window, tripping over a pair of carelessly discarded sneakers left next to his desk. He squinted out the window, but saw nothing.

"Hurry up! I won't last much longer unless you open up your window immediately! I'm down here," cried a distraught ladybug. She was sitting on the window ledge, tapping rapidly at the glass pane and pointing to something overhead. As Phil looked up, he saw a dark, monstrous shadow approaching quickly.

Then the ladybug let out another ear-piercing scream, "Ahhh!"

Frantically, Phil struggled to open the window. But it was stuck shut! As the shadow moved closer, beads of perspiration formed on Phil's forehead. As he pulled with all his might, the stubborn window opened

just a sliver, barely enough for the frightened ladybug to squeeze through into Phil's room. *What is going on?*

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

Phil reacted without thinking, pushing hard against the frame to prevent it from slipping open further. "W-W-What now?" he gasped, staring at the ladybug.



The ladybug shrugged her antennae and muttered, “Please excuse me, sir.” She vaulted toward the bed and slipped under the lip of the pillowcase to hide. As the giant bird continued attacking the window, Phil felt his strength ebbing. He leaned with all his strength on the window frame. Distressed, he called out, “I-I-I can’t hold on like this f-forever!”

The ladybug peeked out from under the bed covers. In the corner sat a small tray that held the crust of a peanut butter sandwich and a shaker of pepper, leftovers from Phil’s late-night snack. The ladybug pointed to the tray, hopping up and down. *I’ll use the pepper grounds*, Phil thought. The bird angrily persevered, forcing her head into the room. With spiked claws, she inched the window open. It would not be long before she would swoop right in and devour her terrified prey.

Phil hurried to the table and grabbed the shaker, showering the creature’s sharp beak with a stream of pepper. “Ah-ah-ah... chooo.” The bird sneezed so forcefully it rattled the windows and shook the room, propelling the ferocious bird backward, through the window. Phil and the ladybug watched as the huge bird flew away, disappearing over the treetops.

“Gesundheit!” the ladybug replied humorously, as she emerged from the bedcovers and buzzed up to the edge of the mirror.

Phil stared wide-eyed at the ladybug. “W-What was that?”

Busily brushing pepper grounds from her antennae, the ladybug replied, “They call her Etah, ruler of the Forest of Discord.” Her accent, which was distinctively British, rose straight from the pages of a dusty old Victorian novel.

A shiver of fear ran down Phil’s spine. He had been warned *never* to go into that forest. “Why was s-s-she chasing you?” demanded Phil, still quite shaken. What had started off as a rather dull morning was turning out to be quite exciting!

Phil noticed the spotted carrying bag the ladybug kept tucked by her side. “Let me try to explain, young man,” she said, digging into her bag, tossing out an old mattress spring, a blue argyle sock, and a tube of toothpaste -- absent the cap. Phil dodged to avoid being hit by the items.

“Ah, here it is!” she said delightedly. Phil drew in closer. The ladybug opened her hand; in her palm sat a long, slender box carved with exotic characters, the likes of which Phil had never seen before. The boldly

printed instructions on the box read, “THIS SIDE UP ONLY.”



The ladybug gently held the treasure up to the light, chuckling. “I haven’t figured out how it works, but it must be very powerful. The old bird was quite upset when she found out that I had it.”

Phil had many questions about Etah, and about how the ladybug had found the mysterious box. But before he had a chance to open his mouth, the ladybug, with a royal bow, asked, “And to whom do I owe my life, kind sir?”

Phil shuffled his feet, ignoring her question.

“W-Who are you?” he asked.

“Why, I’m Lady Dotty. I come from a long and distinguished line of Coccinellidae.” Phil looked puzzled. “Bugs,” she whispered, as if the word were beneath her. The ladybug then laid the magical box on Phil’s pillow.

Phil laughed nervously, which woke the snoozing alarm clock. “What? Are you still here?” the clock asked Phil sternly.

Oh, no. I’m going to be late for school. He headed straight for the bedroom door. “I-I don’t feel like going to s-s-school,” he remarked, facing Dotty.

Lady Dotty buzzed up onto Phil’s shoulder and pulled on his earlobe. “I will meet you there. I have some matters to attend to first, but I could stop by when I’m finished.” She turned to leave.

“B-But you don’t know where to go!”

Dotty reached into her carrying bag. Transformed, she had donned a checkered cap and held a magnifying glass in her antennae. “Elementary, my dear. I’ll find you. Ladybugs have excellent detective skills.” And then she was gone.

“L-Lady D-Dotty, you f-forgot your m-mysterious box!” But Lady Dotty had gone, and Phil’s words fell silently to the ground. He reached for the box. “Ouch!” The box bristled when he touched it. *How did it do that? I’ll return it to Lady Dotty.*

Uneasy, he grabbed the prickly box and shoved it into his shirt pocket, buttoning the pocket shut.

Chapter 2

Phil snatched up the rest of his homework and sprinted out of the bedroom. “Don’t forget your lunch!” Phil’s father reprimanded him as he made his way toward the front door.

He retrieved his lunch bag from the kitchen. “Thanks, Dad!”

As Phil rounded the corner on his way to school, he spotted his neighbor, Sam. Phil’s hands began to sweat, and his heart started to race. *What bad timing! He’s going to mock the way I talk.*

Phil hid under the nearby bushes. But it was too late. Sam had spotted him.

“Gee whiz. I wonder where Phil could be. He can’t even say his own name. Phil is so dumb--he probably won’t finish middle school,” Sam said aloud as he pretended to search for Phil. “Perhaps he’s lost again.” Embarrassed, Phil crawled out, sloth-like, from under the bushes. Sam really made Phil feel insignificant.

Looking around desperately, Phil thought, *I wonder where Dotty could be.*

“What are you looking for? A spaceship to make an escape?” Sam laughed.

Unable to bear Sam’s bullying and teasing, Phil tried to gather enough courage to say, *Don’t make fun of me.* But, before he had a chance, he felt a slight jolt in his pocket. Remembering the baffling box, he retrieved it from its resting place. The cryptic words imprinted on its sides were aglow!

“Wow! A present for me?” marveled Sam, as he snatched the treasure from Phil’s grasp. But the box did not cooperate and stung Sam’s hand -- hard. “Ouch! What the heck? Stop it!” Sam yelled as he flung the treasure box down.

“D-Don’t break it!” Phil pleaded frantically. But Sam didn’t hear him, since he was nursing his aching hand.

“How did you do that?” demanded Sam, looking bewildered.

Phil ignored him. *This box might turn out to be very helpful!* Then he started to worry. *Would Dotty show up? Was she safe?*

Exasperated, Sam continued to barrage Phil with questions. “How did you do that? What’s going on? Do you have some kind of evil powers?”

Phil remained silent. Distressed, Sam turned and stormed off in the direction of the schoolyard. Phil watched him leave and cautiously followed, unsure what to expect next.

Chapter 3

The school was just beyond the Forest of Discord. Half a dozen students were playing nearby. The path into the forest was covered with bramble and thorny vines. At the entrance, on a stake driven deep into the ground, a sign read:

**DANGER. BEWARE. KEEP OUT.
NO TRESPASSING.**

If you can read this, you're already too close!

A cold shiver climbed from Sam's toes to his head. Terrified, he thought, *Nobody goes in there. If anyone tried, they'd never come back.* Then a sneaky and revengeful idea occurred to him. *I'll get back at Phil for what he did to me with the box. I'll pretend that I want to go into that horrible place and I'll ask Phil to come with me. That will petrify him. When he refuses to go, I'll tease him in front of everyone for being scared.* Sam laughed maliciously, thinking about how much fun he would have teasing Phil.

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

Sam stretched high in the air, making an expert catch. “Out!” he cried victoriously.

Phil observed the activities from a safe distance.

“Don’t throw it to Phil,” teased Max in a high-pitched voice. “He doesn’t know how to play.”

“H-H-He’s a f-fumbler and a m-mumbler, and would only drop it,” Christopher mimicked Phil’s stutter in a mean way.



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

“Don’t touch him, or you’ll catch it!” warned Gina.

“He’s got a disease!” yelled another, as the group ran off, laughing and playing.

Standing there alone, Phil lowered his head to his chest. “This is why I don’t like s-school. I-I feel so alone. I-I don’t have a disease,” he mumbled quietly to himself.

“Don’t let them get you down. I stood right next to you, and I didn’t catch anything,” said an unfamiliar voice.

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

“Hi, I just moved here. My name is Rebecca. What’s yours?”

Phil froze. *What am I going to do?* He started to panic. *I don’t want to stutter. I have the hardest time when I try to say my name. I just won’t say anything.*

Rebecca gave Phil a friendly smile, “What’s the matter?”

Uh-oh. I’m in real trouble. I don’t know what to do.

Smack! Suddenly, Dotty dropped right onto Phil’s shoulder. She was wearing a baseball cap and cleats. Her English accent had disappeared. She now spoke in a gruff baseball manager’s voice. “Need some coaching?” she asked, slapping her first leg into her mitt.

Distracted from Rebecca, Phil responded, “D-D-Dotty! I was s-s-so afraid s-s-something had happened

to you.” In that instant, Phil realized that with Dotty around, he didn’t feel self-conscious any more.

“Hello, Dotty,” interrupted Rebecca, delighted to meet the ladybug. She stared back at Phil. “You have a charming friend, but who are you?”

“Ph-Ph-Ph-Phil!” He closed his eyes tightly, expecting Rebecca to burst into laughter.

Instead, Rebecca simply asked, “Do you stutter?”

Phil’s eyes opened wide and he stared at Dotty. “Don’t look at me,” she deflected his question.

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

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

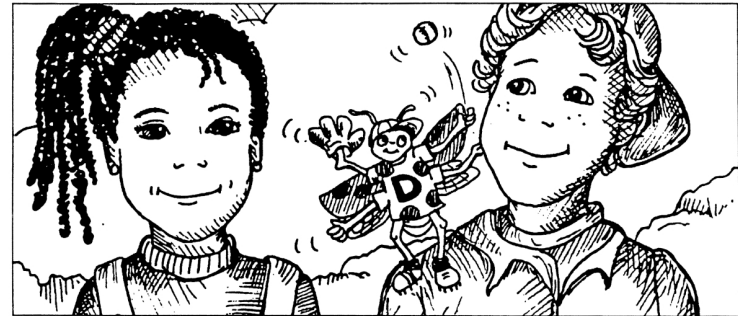
“No. I-I try not to s-s-say anything, because as s-soon as I do, either nobody listens or they make f-f-fun of me.” He felt relieved to talk about his stuttering for the first time.

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

“That’s easy for you to s-s-say,” pouted Phil.

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

“I just want to be friends,” added Rebecca. “I don’t care if you stutter.” She gave Phil a big, warm smile. Phil smiled back, encouraged, *Wow, she didn’t even tease me about my speech!*



Sam spotted Phil over by the roadside, talking to Rebecca. *Now’s the time to get my revenge. I can embarrass Phil in front of everyone.* He yelled out, “Phil, come over here! The Forest of Discord is this way. I’m going in, and I dare you to come with me. Let’s go!”

The ball game stopped. All his classmates were silent, waiting for Phil’s answer. Phil had to start over three times before he was able to say, “I-I d-don’t think s-s-so.” As a crowd formed around Sam and Phil, Phil’s angst quickly returned.

“You can’t go in there,” quivered Erika.

“Nobody can see in there. It’s so dark!” shrieked Christopher.

“You don’t know what kinds of creatures might be in there. You can’t see them, but they can see you,” added another nervously.

Sam was pleased with himself. He had everyone’s complete attention. “You’re all a bunch of wussies. I’ve been in there before. What are you all afraid of? It’s a great place,” he lied. In an attempt to further humiliate Phil, he added, “No one makes fun of anyone.”

Phil’s eyes widened. “W-Where’s that place?”

“Follow me,” Sam added in a spooky voice, taking a giant step toward the forbidden path.

“In t-there?” repeated Phil, his knees shaking.

“I’ve been there. Many times,” said Sam.

The thought of finding a place where everyone would listen to him was too promising. Phil was interested. “T-Tell m-me more about this place.”

“There’s a town called, uh..., Friendshipville! Everyone gets along,” Sam spoke confidently, as if it was true.

“R-Really... a town where everyone is f-f-friendly?”

“You want to go, don’t you?” Sam replied.

“Should you believe him?” interrupted Rebecca.

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

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

“He’s shaking all over,” added Erika.

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

“I-I might talk this way, but it doesn’t m-mean I’m afraid,” Phil said, with a sudden burst of confidence. Phil took a step toward the darkness. “L-Let’s go!”

Sam was stunned. He never believed that Phil would agree to go into such a monstrous place. *I’m getting into a terrible mess*, he thought. *How can I get out of it?* Fearfully, he looked toward the gnarled trees that marked the entrance to the Forest of Discord. He could feel perspiration starting to drip down his forehead. His hands felt clammy and his stomach was queasy. It was all he could do to keep his friends from knowing how terrified he was.

“I’m going with you,” declared Dotty. She tucked her carrying bag tightly under her wing.

“I can’t let you go without me,” echoed Rebecca.

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

“Watch out!” warned Max.

“Be careful,” insisted Christopher.

“We’ll meet you at the playground after school.

That is, if you make it,” added Erika, cringing.

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

Sam was stuck, trapped. He knew he would have to go now. He trembled all over, afraid to speak because his classmates might detect fear in his voice. He didn’t say a word.

Chapter 4

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

Sam took the lead; the others followed close behind. Dark and unfamiliar sounds bombarded them from every direction. The trees moaned enchantingly, calling to them to go deeper into the forest. Phil’s stomach was tied in knots. He was filled with both excitement and dread. He felt the mystical box against his beating heart, as a powerful force pulled them all deeper into the forest.



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

"Splendid," Dotty said. She had transformed herself into a 17th-century explorer, sporting knicker pants, and equipped with a compass. The compass dial spun wildly, pointing first in one direction and then another.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not sure I can walk." Sam winced in pain.

"W-We could help?" Phil hesitated, aware he was addressing his foe.

Sam shifted his weight onto the injured foot. "Ouch!" He looked at Phil and Rebecca, who offered him their hands. "Thanks." He reached out his arm and leaned heavily against his companions.

A strange patch of light peeked through the dense shadows. "L-listen," Phil warned. Grinding, mowing and chomping sounds rose up from the ground. Tree tops cracked and branches fell from above. The air grew dark with dust.

Sam, Phil, Dotty, and Rebecca coughed and choked, unable to move. As the dust settled, they discovered they were surrounded by Beasties. Dozens of them, with gleaming fangs, twelve-fingered limbs,

thorny bodies, and one protruding eyeball fixed in the center of their heads. Etah's voice echoed throughout the forest, "GET ME THAT LADYBUG!"

"S-s-stop!" countered Phil when a Beastie lunged for Dotty and bent one of her wings. Rebecca quickly picked up a rock and hurled it, smacking the Beastie in the back of his head.

Another Beastie grabbed Phil's arm, slashing his pocket with its razor-sharp fangs. Phil felt the box slide out of his pocket and onto the forest ground.

Etah spotted the treasure immediately, and was overcome with delight. She flew from a tree branch above. "At last!" she screeched. "You have returned to me, your master. GRAB THAT BOX!"

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

"This way!" shouted Dotty, waving frantically. Her wing was so badly twisted, she could hardly fly. Recklessly, the foursome dove over the side of the embankment. Without warning, the ground fell out

from beneath them. Rebecca, Phil, Sam, and Dotty plunged into the darkness.



The Beasties dared not follow. They ringed the opening of the hole, peering down at the hurtling bodies. High above them, Etah yelled out, "You fools! They've escaped!"

Chapter 5

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

“Don’t move!” warned Rebecca, who was now clenching Phil’s hand. Phil, in turn, grabbed Sam’s hand. Dotty limped up onto Phil’s shoulder. The foursome snuggled together on the ledge while icy air settled in around them.

Sam’s teeth began to chatter, “What do we do now?”

“I thought you knew everything!” Rebecca snapped back.

The reverberation of their voices triggered a small avalanche of rocks. “L-L-Look out!” shouted Phil as the rocks barely missed them.

“Let’s whisper,” suggested Dotty, who slipped off Phil’s shoulder and tiptoed into the darkness. She

returned, wearing a tiny miner’s hardhat equipped with a headlight. “There’s only one way out. Follow me.”

The light on Dotty’s hardhat shone a few feet ahead, just enough to see the narrow ledge. Holding hands, the adventurers inched forward, leaning against the rock wall for support. The shadows played with the light, making the ledge disappear and reappear with each step.

“I’m not sure I’ll make it,” Sam said worriedly.

“You’ve got to try. We can’t go back now,” Rebecca encouraged him.

As they rounded a corner, Dotty stopped abruptly, throwing the trio off-balance. “There’s something ahead. Look!” She quickly extinguished her miniscule headlight.

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

From around the bend, the cavern filled with a booming voice that rebounded off the chamber walls. “Intruders! Go back! You are not welcome!” A long, rubbery creature radiating a deep orange glow slithered

along like an advancing accordion until he faced them directly. By now, brightness filled the cavern, making it as light as a sun-drenched day. The adventurers stood there, awestruck.

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

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

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

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

“Pleased to m-m-meet you,” replied Phil.

Glo nodded, “You are the first visitors I have had in...oh, decades.”

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

“Visitors used to drop in regularly. Harrumph! I used to have lots of company. It was downright busy. Gradually, everyone slowly disappeared.” He blinked his eyes heavily and sighed, changing the subject. “I do make the best purple stalactite jam around. Would you like to try some?”

“Absolutely!” Rebecca answered without hesitation. Everyone was hungry, since they had not eaten a morsel since breakfast.

Glo led the group around the corner to his cozy den. The walls were lined with soft, tightly woven moss. His body heat radiated outward, making the air warm and moist. The special jam rested in a jar on a small table in an alcove. Glo pulled down four spoons from the cupboard and gave each visitor a utensil. The guests sat on three mismatched chairs. Dotty resumed her perch on Phil’s shoulder.

“You look very dignified!” observed Rebecca to Dotty, who was wearing a wee tux over a crisp, starched shirt accented by a polka dot tie.

“Tell us the rest of your story, Glo. What happened?” pleaded Sam.

Glo scooped up a large spoonful of jam and popped it in his mouth. “Well, I’m not exactly sure.” Glo shook his head in disgust. “Things weren’t the same. An evil bird, Etah, had a strange power over us. She became a tyrant who ruled the forest.”



“Yes, very bad indeed,” Dotty choked. “Etah’s servants, the Beasties, devoured most of the trees. I’m not even sure my nest is still standing.”

“W-We’ve got to do s-something!” Phil insisted. “I-I wonder if F-Friendshipville is still there?”

“It has to be,” hoped Rebecca. “We’ve come so far already.”

“We need to get out of here first,” Sam interrupted.

Within moments, the forgotten beautiful box began to stir inside Phil’s shirt. The room grew dimmer.

“What’s happening?” Glo gasped, as the light slowly drained from his body.

“It’s getting cold in here!” exclaimed Sam.

“I-It’s the box,” Phil guessed as they all shielded their eyes from the intense glow.

“Get rid of that thing!” shrieked Rebecca. She grabbed the box from Phil’s shirt pocket and threw it. The box teetered on the edge of the cavern, but did not fall off.

Suddenly, the light drained completely from the box, as Glo’s light slowly returned.

“Kick it off the ledge!” shouted Sam.

Phil felt the box tugging at him, as if to say, “Pick me up!” He resisted at first, but then obeyed.

“Throw it over the edge,” pleaded Sam.

But Phil could not seem to destroy the box. Protectively, he returned it gingerly to his shirt pocket.

“It’s dangerous! Get rid of it!” Glo insisted.

“I-It’s O.K. now,” Phil reassured the group. However, deep down, he was not convinced.

“Where did it come from?” Glo asked.

Dotty answered, “I found it one day, unguarded, in Etah’s nest. Two Beasties who were assigned to

stand watch, had gorged themselves on forest berries and fallen asleep. So, I grabbed the box. Etah's been chasing me for days."

"Now what do we do?" asked Rebecca impatiently.

"More important, how do we get out of here?" inquired Sam.

Glo cocked his head, scratching his back with the tip of his curlicue tail.

"There must be a way," Rebecca added tentatively.

"I've been thinking; what about that stream?"

Glo remembered. He pointed across the cavern. "The Esteemed River. It used to lead out of here, but I'm not sure if it does anymore."

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

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

"I-It's where true f-friendship lives," responded Phil.

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

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

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

"How could you have done that, Sam?" Rebecca demanded.

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

"I wouldn't laugh," Dotty empathized.

Sam clenched his hands. "My father always tells me there is no place for cowards. He won't let me ever say I'm afraid, but yet I am sometimes."

"W-w-we all get a-afraid. I'm s-scared people will tease or not listen to me because I s-s-stutter," Phil felt more confident now, sharing his feelings.

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

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

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

The rocky path veered sharply upward; the ledge was narrow and slippery. One wrong step, and the adventurers were doomed; they would fall into the Esteemed River.

“What’s that smell?” demanded Rebecca. A sour stench from the curdling stream below captured their noses. Sam complained, “I am so tired.”

“We can’t rest now,” encouraged Rebecca. “Look!”

The trail turned upward and embraced a sliver of sunlight. “We’ve found the way out! I’ll go ahead and scout,” announced Dotty, flying quickly toward the opening.

“Let’s go!” Phil started up the steep incline as the others followed close behind him.

Glo waved good-bye with his tail, leaving streaks of light with each swish. “You’re welcome to visit anytime.”

“Thank you,” answered the trio in unison, leaving only an echo behind.

Chapter 6

Meanwhile, deep in the Forest of Discord, high above the trees in her fortress of decaying leaves and thorns, Etah fumed. “How could you have let them escape?”

The captain of the Beasties was accustomed to soothing Etah when she was angry. “I’ve posted guards to watch the pit day and night. Three patrols are combing the forest, just in case they manage to find a way out. Your Nastiness, don’t worry; they can’t escape.”

“You’ve never failed me before, Wollof. But there’s always a first time. And you know that my punishments can be severe, even fatal,” Etah huffed.

Captain Wollof almost swallowed his tongue. He remembered what had happened to the last captain.



“Get the scouts together. I want a progress report, NOW!” Etah commanded.

As the alarm sounded, Beasties scurried to line up. They tried in vain to stand at attention, since their bodies just could not stay upright. In fact, it was natural for Beasties to slouch.

Etah surveyed her servants. “What a motley bunch you are! No wonder you can’t do a thing right. Just look at you! Slothful, and ugly, too.”

Etah eyed a young Beastie who was desperately trying to hide at the end of the line. “You! Step up here immediately! Tell me what is wrong with you. Go on! Hurry up! I don’t have all day to wait.”

The young creature spoke softly. “Well, I’m not very clever. I was never very good with numbers.”

“Go on,” Etah encouraged.

“I’m clumsy. My teeth are crooked, and my bark is matted,” the young Beastie added quickly.

Wollof watched carefully, remembering an incident from years ago. *This same young Beastie was full of pride when he grew his first limb. But Etah surely knew how to make Beasties doubt themselves. How clever she is!* By the time the young Beastie finished, Wollof’s eyes were filled with tears.

“Enough of your dribble,” snapped Etah, suddenly remembering why she had summoned the Beasties together. “Now, where is that ladybug?”

Before any excuses could begin, one of the patrols burst into the back row of the assembly. “We’ve got her!” one of them screamed with joy, holding Dotty up by her tattered wings.

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

The leader of the patrol stepped forward cautiously. “There is no box, Your Nastiness. We’ve looked everywhere.”

“I knew it! You’ve bungled again.”

Chapter 7

An exhausted Phil, Rebecca, and Sam emerged from the cavern. Only a few jagged rocks could be seen on the otherwise barren horizon. The blustery wind breathed down on them.

Rebecca shivered. “Where’s Dotty?”

Phil scanned the hostile terrain, searching for his friend. “I-I don’t see her. I-I hope nothing bad has happened to her.”

“Look over here!” called Sam. He was holding Dotty’s abandoned spotted bag between two fingers.

“Beasties were here, too,” Rebecca observed. The gritty sand revealed their unmistakable footprints.

“W-We’ve got to go rescue her,” pleaded Phil.

“Before we go anywhere, we’ll need a plan,” Rebecca interjected.

“E-etah will n-never let Dotty go,” Phil sighed, as he paced restlessly and touched his shirt pocket, where the box was tucked inside. Suddenly, he had an idea. “I-I-I know what to do. We’ll trade D-dotty for the box!”

“What if Etah captures *us* instead?” Sam fretted.

“That box seems to have mysterious powers. Maybe we should keep it,” Rebecca interrupted.

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

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

“It has a lid. Open it!” Rebecca demanded.

Phil reached down and picked up the box. There were two hinges on the back, but there didn’t appear to be any locks. He tried to pry the lid open gently, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Let me try,” Sam insisted, wiping his hands on his jeans to get a better grip on the box. Sam pulled and poked, but the box stayed tightly closed, like an oyster guarding its pearl.

“Maybe you have to press or move the lid in a certain way to make it open. Give it to me,” Rebecca directed Sam. “I think we should try pushing both sides at the same time...like this,” Rebecca demonstrated. Sure enough, the lid opened slowly.

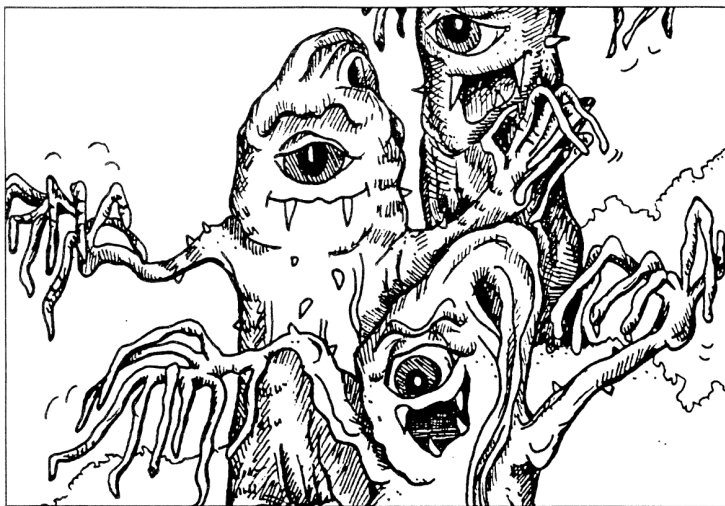
“FLESRU OYNI EVE ILEB,” the box rumbled. Stunned, Rebecca let the box fall to the ground, where

it lay silently. “What could that mean?” whispered Sam.

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

“Perhaps if we say it faster, or write it down, we can figure it out,” Rebecca suggested.

“That’s a good. . .” Sam started to reply. But, before he had a chance to finish his thought, a sinister laugh rang out from the treetops, terrifying them. Phil immediately scooped up the box and shoved it back into his shirt pocket.



“You’re surrounded! Not too clever, are you?” Etah shrieked wickedly.

Beasties appeared from behind boulders and trees. Between Wollof’s claws dangled a small cage in which Dotty was being held captive.

“W-w-what are you doing to her?” Phil demanded. He turned towards the cage, “D-Dotty! Are you all right?”

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

“What have you done to her?” asked Sam.

“She looks hurt!” cried Rebecca.

“Such a caring bunch! I’m touched,” mocked Etah. “Now, let’s get down to business. WHO HAS MY BOX?” She leered at the adventurers, fanning her claws slowly, then turned her attention to Sam. “I’m speaking to you. What a pitiful sight you are.”

“It’s not here,” Sam replied nervously.

Etah flew down from her perch and hovered over him. “I know someone has it. We’ll just see how long you’ll stick up for your friends.” She moved closer to Sam. “I’ll let you go if you tell me who has the box.” Sam just could not help glancing at Phil.

“I see! My question is answered!”

“But I didn’t say anything,” Sam grumbled.

Chapter 8

“It’s no use, Phil, you’ve been betrayed,” Etah cackled. Then she spotted the outline of the box in his shirt pocket.

“Hand it over to me!” Etah ordered.

Phil reached into his pocket, grabbing the box. His hand trembled. He grasped the sides and pushed on each side with the exact same amount of pressure... “FLESRU OYN EVE ILEB,” the box rumbled again.

“You have no p-power over m-m-me,” stuttered Phil. “I-I know the box’s s-s-secret,” he bluffed.



For the first time, Etah was visibly shaken. “That is not possible,” she announced, sizing up her opponent. She swiped the box away from Phil and clutched it securely between her claws.

“You know nothing! Do you think you can fool me?” Etah heckled. “You are fools. Grab them, Beasties!” The adventurers felt hopeless; they were surrounded. “Take them to the dungeon!” It was the last thing they heard before being nabbed.

“I can’t see anything,” a tiny voice squeaked.

“D-Dotty, are you OK?” Phil inquired gently?

“Here’s your spotted bag. We found it on the ground.” Sam dangled the tiny bag in the darkness.

Within seconds, the dungeon lit up. Dotty, clad in orange, lay in a small cage and was balancing a single candle on a shiny ceramic holder.

“How depressing!” Rebecca observed. She tried to pop Dotty’s cage door open, but it held fast.

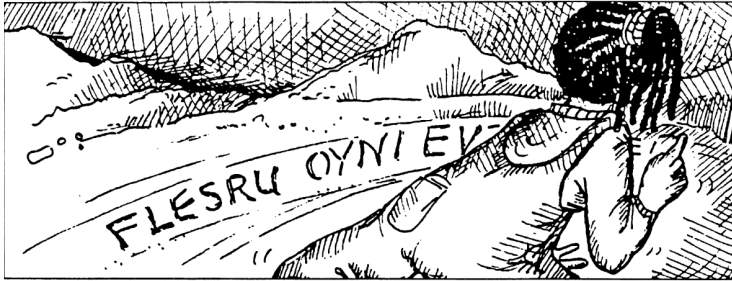
Phil stared at Dotty, concerned. “W-What was wrong with you up there? W-w-what did Etah do to you?”

“I’m not really sure,” Dotty shook her head slowly. “One minute I was feeling fine. And the next minute, I was speechless.”

“W-W-We’ve got to get out of here b-before it happens to us.”

Rebecca sighed, surveyed the slick wall that encircled them, and whispered, “We need a plan.” A pale light from above was partially blocked by a Beastie who was standing guard. She turned to Phil.

“You had Etah worried when you said you knew the secret. Let’s try to figure it out. It’s our only chance.” Rebecca carefully etched the magic words into the dirt as Dotty held the candle above their heads. “FLESRU OYN EVE ILEB,” Rebecca repeated, as she wrote the words with her index finger. “Doesn’t make any sense.”



“Get them out!” ordered Etah from above the dungeon, interrupting their conversation. A rope stair dropped down through the opening, beckoning them to climb up. Terrified, they made the ascent. “COME, NOW!” Etah shouted at the adventurers.

In the center of the arena sat a small crude platform that Beasties were busy decorating with branches of poison oak and thistles. Benches that had been unevenly carved from rotten logs surrounded the stage. Some of the Beasties had already selected their seats, and were anxiously waiting for the ceremony to begin.

“Enough, enough. It’s time,” signaled Etah to her chief aide, Wollof.

Waving his giant limbs, Wollof motioned everyone to gather around. They did so immediately.

The prisoners were dragged to the platform. Dotty’s cage swung from a nail hammered into a tree. Ragged and tired, the adventurers appeared to be no match for Etah. How she relished this moment! Her box was now safely tucked away. And, she had thought all night about how to orchestrate this event.

Etah first picked on Phil, thinking he would be the easiest to humiliate. “You tried to outsmart me,” she cooed. “Look at you now! Go ahead, admit that you have been whipped. You are a bumbler and a fool. You can’t even say your own name, Ph-Ph-Phil,” she cackled, watching her words take effect on him. All the Beasties chuckled.

Sam, Rebecca and Dotty did not move. Phil felt a lump in his throat. He glanced at Rebecca and Sam. Although they said nothing, he sensed their support.

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

Phil remembered the conversation he had in the cell with his friends. *We must figure out the secret.*

Blocking out Etah's badgering, Phil concentrated on repeating the mysterious phrase over and over.

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

Phil could feel his will weakening, and his mind slipping into a trance. He shook his head. *THIS SIDE UP ONLY. What if I don't do as she says? What if Etah had everything backwards?* And then it occurred to him, the message--it was backwards, too!

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

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

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

Wollof laughed out loud. That was the first time anyone had ever stood up to Her Nastiness! Etah turned around to face Wollof. Her eyes burning. Wollof swallowed hard. "It's over," he said quietly. "I think I knew what was wrong all along, but was afraid to admit it."

Etah felt her hold on her empire collapsing. One by one, the Beasties paraded over to stand behind

Wollof. Etah began to panic; she knew she must act quickly. Before the others could mutiny, Etah spoke. "How dare you question me? You are all worthless. Full of faults and shortcomings. You are nothing without me."

"D-don't listen to her. B-Believe in yourself!" called out Phil.

Sam, Rebecca, and the Beasties added in chorus, "Believe in yourself!"

Etah shook more and more with each chant. "Stop it! Stop it! I command you!" she shrieked, panic-stricken.

Etah tried to block out their voices, but their powerful words – *believe in yourself* -- were too strong for her. Since the beginning of time, the kind and loving Elders of the Beasties had used the magical box to teach peace and harmony to all in their community. The box's secret was its message: confidence, accepting one another, believing in yourself. When Etah stole the box, the message was immediately erased from the memories of everyone in the forest. She was then able to control and use them for her own evil ways. As soon as Phil and his friends decoded the message, Etah's influence stopped.

Etah turned to escape. As she climbed skyward and was out of sight, all that remained was a rush of chilly air from her flapping wings.



“It’s over!” cheered Wollof. “Etah’s reign is over, thanks to you!” He gave Phil a warm Beastie embrace, patting his locks with the tip of his limb.

“Let me out of here!” Dotty started shouting as she rattled her cage.

Chapter 9

“They’ve returned!” hollered Gina, so relieved when she saw Sam, Phil, Rebecca, and Dotty emerge from the forest. The classmates had been nervously waiting in the park, for over two hours, since school ended.

A chorus of questions cascaded toward the adventurers. “Was it scary? What’s in there? How did you find your way back?”



“We knew you could do it!” Max slapped Sam on the back.

Christopher swiped at Dotty, trying to knock her off Phil’s shoulder. “S-s-stop it, Ch-Christopher.”

“Why should I listen to you?” he replied.

“Did you find Friendshipville?” Erika quizzed the daredevils.

“To be honest,” Sam started sheepishly, “there is no Friendshipville.” He hesitated, not sure what else to say. “Friendshipville is a place I made up. I ...”

“W-w-wait,” Phil interrupted. “I-I-I did find it! F-f-Friendshipville isn’t a place; it’s a feeling. It’s when everyone r-respects and a-accepts one another. N-no one is bullied for being different.” He looked back at Rebecca and Sam.

“Where someone helps you when you need it,” reflected Sam.

“Where we can rely on each other to figure things out,” added Rebecca. “Even when it’s hard.”

Phil pointed to himself. “I-I learned that Fr-friendshipville begins with m-me. I-I need to accept that I’m different.” Finally having the confidence to say this in front of his classmates, Phil felt pride and relief. “I-I s-s-st-stutter, but that’s only part of who I am.”

And then Phil, Rebecca, and Sam smiled at each other. “How about playing catch, Phil?” asked Sam. All of their classmates looked puzzled.

“Sam, you never let Phil play!” Erika was stunned.

“Things can change,” quipped Sam with a smile.

Rebecca picked up the ball and tossed it to Christopher. Gradually, one by one, they all joined in.

Sam caught the ball and threw it as high as he could. Phil lunged, catching the ball on the tips of his fingers and, in the process, knocking Dotty to the ground.

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

“I-I knew I-I could do it!”

THE END

