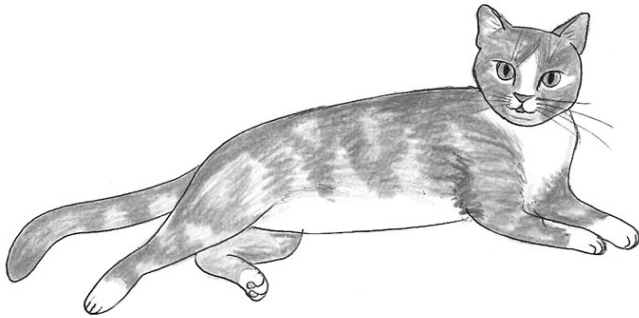


Kate and Sam to the Rescue



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Trintje Nydam and Peter Nydam (aged 6)

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Dedicated to Trintje and Peter, of course.
(And to Nightshade, the definitely indoor cat.)



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Kate and Sam To The Rescue



One summer evening Sam and Kate's parents went for a walk.

"We're just going around the block," said Mama, "We'll be back in fifteen minutes."

But they did not come back in fifteen minutes. At bedtime when Mama and Dad were still not home, Sam and Kate were quite concerned, but they took care of everything as best they could. They put on their pajamas and brushed their teeth. They even remembered to refill the water bowl of the family's old ginger cat Nasturtium. Then they read themselves a chapter of a book, tucked each other in, and turned out their lights. They hoped that Mama and Dad would be back in the morning.





The next morning the doorbell rang. When Sam peeked out the window, he saw no one there, but a special delivery letter in an iridescent green envelope lay on the front mat. It was addressed to Sam and Kate. He ripped open the envelope, calling to Kate, and they both leaned close over the enclosed paper to read it together.

Early Monday Morning

Dear Kate and Sam,

We are very sorry we did not get home on time last night as we promised. Unfortunately, just as we turned the corner of Elm Street, a large, fierce yellow dragon swooped down and carried us off. He flew a very long way and landed in the middle of the night at a mountain cave. It is a dreadfully gloomy cave on a dreadfully tall, rocky mountain, but we do have a plan to escape. The only problem is, it may take us quite a while, as we'll have to wait for the dragon to fall asleep, then we'll sneak out a back entrance on the far side of the mountain. We will get back to you as soon as we can. Until we do, take good care of each other and Nasturtium, and please remember to water the geraniums on the front porch.

We miss you.

Love, Mama (and Dad)

Kate looked at Sam, and Sam looked at Kate.

“What should we do?” asked Sam.

“Water the geraniums, I guess,” said Kate.

“But we can’t just wait for Mama and Dad! Who knows how long it will be? I think we need to go and rescue them.”

Kate thought about this for a moment. “What about the geraniums?” she said.

It was at this point that Nasturtium, the old orange cat, joined the conversation. She cleared her throat with a meow, and said, “I can ask someone to water them while we’re away.” Now, Nasturtium had never spoken to anyone in the family before, at least not in English, so the children were quite astonished, but it was Kate who focused on the most important question.

“What do you mean ‘while *we’re* away?’” she demanded.

“I mean that Sam is right. Your parents need rescuing, and it will take all of us to accomplish it.”

“You can’t rescue anyone, Nasturtium,” pointed out Sam, “You’re an inside cat. You’re *afraid* of the outside!”

Nasturtium raised her head high and replied with quiet dignity, “I know that. But you need me to help you communicate with the animals you meet. You need me for this rescue, and I’ll need you to protect me from the Outside. We can do it together.”

Sam looked at Kate, and Kate looked at Sam.

“What should we do?” asked Sam.

“Start packing, I guess,” said Kate.

They got out their school backpacks and stuffed in a blanket and a jacket for each of them, their toothbrushes, two flashlights, a very large stack of sandwiches, a bag of carrots, bug spray, and sunscreen. While Kate filled some water bottles to put in the outer pockets, Sam packed several blank notebooks, a couple of pencils, and the letter from Mama and Dad.

Nasturtium hopped up onto a windowsill in the living room and began to mew loudly. Kate was about to ask her what she was doing

when there was a rustling in the shrubbery below the window, and a black-masked face with a pointed nose appeared beyond the screen.

“Look, Sam,” Kate whispered, and they watched as Nasturtium and the raccoon sniffed at each other through the screen and conversed in low tones. After a few minutes, the raccoon disappeared, and the cat jumped down from the windowsill and sauntered over to rub against the backpacks that stood on the floor.

She purred, “That should take care of the geraniums. He said he’d look after the rest of the garden, too. He knows how to work the hose.”

“What do *you* need for the trip, Nasturtium?” Kate asked.

The cat replied, “Five cups of dry food should do it.” So Kate measured the cat food into a plastic bag, wrapped it up securely with a rubber band, and put it next to the sandwiches. Then they were ready to go.

When they stepped out of the house, it was a gorgeous summer day. Sam locked the door carefully behind them, and while he stowed the spare house key in one of the small pockets of his backpack, Kate looked around consideringly.

“We should head toward the mountains, I guess,” she said, pointing to the distant grey peaks that reached toward the smiling blue sky. “Mama said the dragon took them to a mountain.”

Sam nodded, but at his first step, Nasturtium, who had been huddled against Kate’s ankles, mewed, “Don’t leave me!”

“Well, come on then,” Sam replied.

But Nasturtium’s ears were low and she pressed herself against the porch floor. “Please carry me,” she begged piteously, and Kate leaned over and scooped her up.

Sam shook his head dubiously. “You’re an inside cat,” he said again, but Nasturtium buried her head under Kate’s chin and did not answer. Kate shrugged at her brother.

Then they set off down the porch steps and were on their way to rescue their parents.

It was a long walk. When they got hungry around lunchtime they sat down under a maple tree in a park and ate some of their food.

“I’m *so* tired,” Sam moaned, lying back on the grass and closing his eyes.

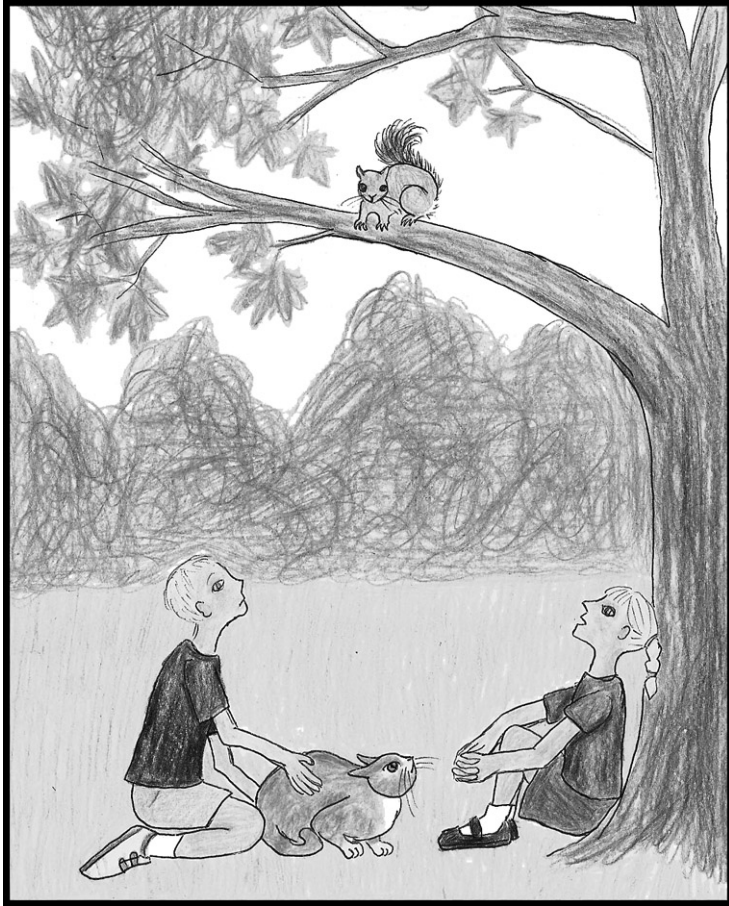
“I guess this is the farthest we’ve ever walked all by ourselves,” Kate agreed, wondering whether she could eat another sandwich now or had better save it for later. Nasturtium lay low between them, her ears twitching anxiously whenever a breeze moved over the grass. Seeing her nervousness, Kate added, “I can’t carry you any more, Nasturtium. You’re too heavy, and you keep digging your claws into my shoulder.”

“I’m sorry,” the cat murmured, “But the air keeps *moving*. I never know when it might pounce on me!”

Sam sat up, making Nasturtium flinch again. He said firmly, “The air is not pouncing on you, silly! It just moves all the time. It doesn’t mean anything. Don’t be such a scaredy cat!”

A chattering up in the tree made them all look up into the branches, and there they saw a small grey squirrel.

Nasturtium scowled and the tip of her tail flicked back and forth irritably. “He’s laughing at me,” she muttered.



“Well you *are* being silly,” Sam retorted. “Hey, wait, can you understand what the squirrel says?”

“Of course,” Nasturtium answered, still frowning at the squirrel.

Sam scabbled in his backpack for a notebook and a pencil. “Tell me what he’s saying!”

Reluctantly Nasturtium muttered, “He says, ‘Better watch out, house cat, or the clouds might eat you.’”

Kate looked up at the squirrel above them. He quirked his tail impudently. She called up, “Don’t give her a hard time, squirrel! She’s on a rescue mission, so that’s braver than you are, I bet!” Then she turned to Nasturtium and said, “Tell him that in animal language.”

Nasturtium mewed up to the squirrel, and it leaned low and chittered back at her.

“What are you saying? What are you saying?” Sam asked eagerly as the conversation went on. It ended to the children’s surprise when the squirrel suddenly scampered down the tree trunk and bounded to the ground beside them.

“He says he’s coming, too,” announced Nasturtium, and in her interest in the conversation she had sat straight up and forgotten for the moment to be afraid of the breeze.

“Oh!” Kate said, surprised. “Why?”

“He says he wants an adventure.”

“Okay, I guess. Does he have a name?”

“Chk!” said the squirrel, fixing Kate with a shiny black eye.

“That’s his name,” Nasturtium explained, “Chk. It means Beechnut.”

Sam wrote the word carefully in the notebook and then returned the notebook and pencil to his backpack.

“Well, we’d better start walking again, I guess,” said Kate.

Nasturtium’s ears pressed back against her head as the two children stood up, but she glanced at the little squirrel snickering at her again, squared her shoulders, and hurried to keep close to Sam’s ankles as he set off through the park once more toward the distant mountains.

They walked all afternoon, and by dinner time everyone was hot, hungry, exhausted, and irritable. Nasturtium had tangled herself in Sam’s legs and tripped him twice in her fear of puffs of wind, and Kate had ended up with a scratch on her wrist from detangling the jittery cat from a bush where she had tried to hide from the breeze. No one was in a very good mood.

When Kate said, “Let’s stop and rest under the trees here,” Sam said grumpily, “I bet it’s nothing but mosquitoes there.”

“Well where do *you* want to stop?” demanded Kate.

“Not in a stupid woods full of stupid mosquitoes!”

“Show me someplace nicer, then!”

“You don’t have to yell at me!”

“Well, you’re the one who started it!”

Nasturtium suddenly flopped down between the two children, huffed loudly, and stuffed her head under her paws. “It’s bad enough when you squabble at home,” she muttered, “But now I can’t even run into your parents’ bedroom to get some peace.”

Kate looked at Sam, and Sam looked at Kate. Kate began to smile. “Come on, Sam. Don’t you want some dinner?” she said, “I’ll spray you with bug spray.”

“Oh, okay,” he answered, and sat down under the trees.

They slept that night wrapped in their blankets, with Nasturtium and Beechnut curled up between them. The mosquitoes did not bite them *too* badly.



When Nasturtium woke, she sat up, stretched her back into a high arch, sat down, and began to lick herself. In the middle of her bath, however, she suddenly stiffened, her whiskers twitching. She sniffed, and her pupils grew huge and black.

“Hey!” she whispered, licking Kate’s chin.

“Hey!” she hissed more loudly, poking Sam’s chest with a paw.

“MROWR!” she shouted, and both children woke up suddenly.

“There’s a strange animal around here,” she announced.

“So?” muttered Sam, rubbing his eyes and sitting up blearily.

“What kind of animal?” asked Kate, standing up and shaking out her blanket. “Are you sure it isn’t just the breeze again?”

“No, it’s a strange animal. It smells like a cat, but... well, not a cat.” Nasturtium began to walk toward a large clump of bushes, her tail held upright in greeting, her ears pointing straight ahead with cautious interest. Kate and Sam and the squirrel watched the cat approach the bushes, and mew a tentative hello. Then with a sudden yowl she spun around, leapt back to the children in a single bound, and flung herself madly under Sam’s blanket where she huddled in a quivering lump. The squirrel took one look at her and scampered up the nearest tree, but

before Sam and Kate could react they heard a rustling in the bushes and turned again to look.

An enormous tiger slunk out from the shrubbery and crouched down on the grass, staring at the children intently from amber eyes. Everyone seemed too terrified to move.

After a long silence, the tiger cleared its throat with a low growl and said, quite clearly despite a heavy accent, "I circus tiger. I hungry."

"Don't turn around," whispered Sam, "I think I read that tigers like to attack their prey from behind."

The huge beast shook its head and bent down as if it were bowing. "No eat human," it said, then repeated, "Circus."

"But... do you eat cats?" asked Kate nervously.

"No," the tiger growled. It seemed to be getting angry, and Kate edged closer to her brother. "No, no! Circus!"

Then Beechnut began to chatter down from the branch, and the tiger looked up into the tree, ears moving eagerly at the sound.

"What's he saying?" Sam asked Nasturtium, and he reached for his notebook.

Reluctantly, Nasturtium backed out from under the blanket and listened closely as the squirrel and the tiger talked together. Finally she reported, "The tiger says he was accidentally left behind by his circus. He was born in captivity and has never hunted his own food, and he's lost. He doesn't speak much English, but he's picked up a few words from living in the circus. He was hoping you could give him something to eat."

"But what can we give him?" gasped Kate, while Sam rushed to scribble notes on the sounds that were words in the animals' language. Kate added, "We have only enough sandwiches for today for ourselves, and they'd hardly make a snack for a huge creature like him!"

"Let's go to the supermarket," said Sam

"We don't have any money," Kate reminded him in a worried voice.

But Sam grinned. "I think it will be fine. Nasturtium, how do you say, 'Come with us?'"

The orange cat made some noises and, turning to the tiger, Sam repeated them as best he could. The tiger looked quite astonished, and Nasturtium and Beechnut both burst into laughter.

“You just told him,” chortled Nasturtium, her whiskers quivering with amusement, “You just told him, ‘Mop the squid!’” Then she turned to the tiger and spoke to him. He smiled quite broadly, showing extremely long teeth, but inclined his head graciously toward the children. The cat smoothed her whiskers and added, “He says his name is Turgen-teguli.”

The children zipped up their backpacks and lifted them to their backs. To their surprise, there, sitting under Kate’s backpack, was another green special delivery envelope.

“How did that get there?” Kate exclaimed, but she opened it hastily and held it out so that she and Sam could both read.

Monday Night

Dear Sam and Kate,

Last night after the yellow dragon fell asleep in the doorway, Dad and I crept very quietly out of his cave by the back way. It was a long, long tunnel and we were entirely in the dark, but finally we reached the end and I climbed out through a hole - but it was too small for Dad. We both began to pry away some of the stones to make the hole bigger, but our digging made so much noise echoing up the tunnel that the dragon woke up. Just as Dad managed to escape from the tunnel, the dragon came flying around from the other side of the mountain to catch us. We ran down the mountainside as fast as we could, tripping and stumbling in the dark. That’s when we fell into the deep crevice. Luckily there were plenty of soft mosses and ferns at the bottom so we weren’t seriously hurt, and the dragon’s fire couldn’t reach us down there, but so far we haven’t found a way to climb back out.

We’ll keep looking, and we’ll try to get home as soon as we can. In the meantime, please cooperate with each other and don’t squabble!

Love, Mama (and Dad)

Sam looked at Kate, and Kate looked at Sam. “Sorry about squabbling last night,” said Kate.

“Yeah, me too,” Sam said. He glanced over the letter again. “It looks like Mama and Dad still need rescuing as much as ever. We’d better get on our way.”

The two children and three animals set off walking again. They were nearing the edge of town now, but it was not long before they saw the big plastic sign for a Super Buy supermarket. Instead of going in at the front door, however, Sam led the way around to the back where there was a large black dumpster.

“This is where the supermarket throws away the food they can’t sell. I think we’ll find what we need here,” he said, and left his backpack on the ground before clambering up the side to peer in. “Perfect!” he declared, and swung a leg over the side and dropped right into the dumpster with a thump. In a moment he started flinging styrofoam trays of meat over the side to land on the asphalt in front of the others. “Rump roast. Prime rib. Salmon filet. Pork chops. More prime rib. Boneless chicken breast. Turkey burger. Is that enough or do you need more?”

Kate quickly began pulling the plastic wrap off the meat and handing it to the tiger who, after one grateful look, began gulping huge mouthfuls as fast as he could.

Nasturtium cowered every time another meat tray hit the ground, but after a minute she called to Sam, “Beechnut wants to know if there are any nuts in there for him!”

Sam rummaged around for a bit and soon half a box of raisins came flying over the side of the dumpster. “Will that do? Hey, Nasturtium, ask Turgen if he can eat dog food. There’s some in here and it would be a lot easier to carry that than a backpack full of raw meat.”

When Nasturtium spoke to the tiger, he stopped eating only long enough to give one brief word that Kate and Sam were already beginning to recognize as “Yes.” So Sam’s head popped up inside the dumpster and he handed a bag of dog food out to Kate.

Just then Beechnut began chattering urgently and Nasturtium cried, “There’s someone coming! Hide!”

It was too late for Sam to get out of the dumpster, so he crouched down low inside while Kate, Nasturtium, and Turgen scrambled to get

behind a chain link fence. Beechnut climbed up the fence and perched at the top, keeping watch.

A man was coming across the asphalt with a couple of large trash bags. While everyone held their breath, he walked straight over to the dumpster, heaved his trash bags over the edge, and turned back to the supermarket's service door. He had noticed nothing.

When he was safely back inside Beechnut sounded the All Clear, and Sam climbed out of the dumpster, brushing dried coffee grounds out of his hair. "Phew, it stinks in there," he remarked. Turgen came toward him, leaned against his shoulder, and purred.

"He says Thank You," said Nasturtium.

Sam answered, "You're welcome, Turgen. But now we'd better get to that mountain. It looks awfully far away, and my legs are still tired from yesterday!"

When Kate handed him his backpack, Sam pulled several clementines from his pockets and put them in it.

Turgen said something, and Nasturtium translated, "He offered to give you a ride."

"Wow!" exclaimed Kate, "Can he do that? It would be so cool to ride a tiger!"

The tiger crouched down, and the two children climbed onto his broad striped back. Nasturtium leapt into Kate's arms, and Beechnut sprang up in front of Sam.

"Ready?" asked the tiger gruffly.

"I guess so," answered Kate and Sam.

Turgen-teguli stood and loped off. The children felt terribly unstable at first, as the tiger's striped coat was very smooth, and they were afraid to squeeze too tightly. However, after a while they got used to the tiger's even stride, and he certainly went much faster than they could have walked. Soon they had left town behind and were weaving their way through the forest that surrounded the mountains. By dinnertime they were near the foot of the steepest tall grey mountain. Turgen stopped, and the others slid off.

Everyone stretched gratefully, and Kate tried to say, "Thank you" in animal speech. Beechnut began tittering again.

“Good try,” Nasturtium said, “But you pronounced it wrong. The way you said it sounded more like ‘Elbow bird.’ Maybe it’s time you had proper lessons in animal language.”

Sam cried “Great idea!” and reached for his pencil and notebook.

Kate cried, “Great idea – after dinner!” and reached for the last of the sandwiches.

It was an excellent lesson, and by the end of it the children could say “please” and “thank you,” “yes,” “no,” “hello,” and “goodbye” quite accurately. They were also beginning to understand much more of what the animals were saying when they spoke to each other. The lesson came to an abrupt end, however, when there was a dreadful squawking hullabaloo high up in the tree above them, and at the sudden noise Nasturtium panicked and leapt straight for Kate’s chest.

Kate lost her balance and fell backwards, the cat slid off her chest, scrabbling with her claws, Sam yelped in startlement, and the shrill ruckus in the treetop continued unabated.

“Ouch! Nasturtium!” Kate scolded, “Look what you did! You gave me an awful scratch and you snagged my shirt!” She held up the end of thread that the cat’s claws had pulled out, and it stretched longer and longer from the unraveling edge of the shirt.

“Don’t keep pulling,” Sam advised, “You’d better just break it off carefully and we’ll ask Mama to mend it when we’re all home again.”

Kate glared reproachfully at Nasturtium as she carefully snapped the thread. The part that had already unraveled made a loose ball in her hand, but before she could do anything with it, she noticed a blue jay perched in the branches directly overhead. It seemed to be watching unusually intently, and after a minute it occurred to Kate to say, “Hello,” in animal speech.

“Hello,” the bird replied, cocking its crested head to stare at her.

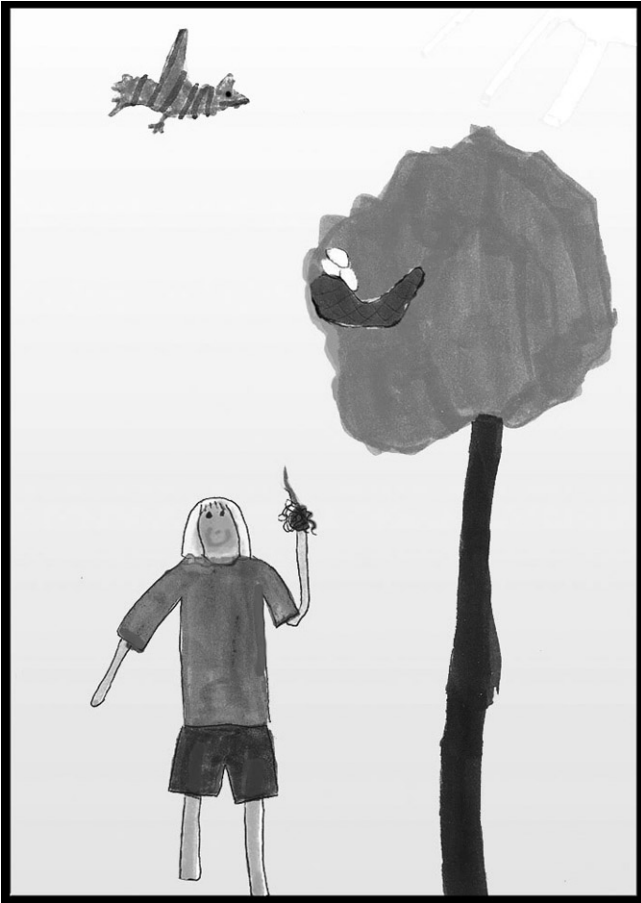
The others all looked up, and Beechnut began chattering away with the blue jay so quickly that Sam and Kate didn’t understand a word they said. Nasturtium began translating for the children as the conversation went on.

“The blue jay says it’s her sister making all that noise up in the tree. She has a nest up there in the topmost branches, with three eggs. But last time the yellow dragon flew by he swatted it with the spike of his tail and tore the edge so badly that the blue jay’s family is afraid next

time he flies over it will tip and the eggs will fall out. They're all in a tizzy because the dragon usually flies out of his cave just around this time. She says we'd better make sure we're well hidden."

Kate looked at Sam, and Sam looked at Kate. Without saying a word they both grabbed their backpacks and blankets and dragged them under some denser low branches.

"I wish there was something we could do to help the blue jay's sister," said Kate when they had finished. Then



she remembered the ball of tangled thread in her fist. She held it up toward the bird on the branch above. "Could your sister use this somehow?"

The blue jay swooped down to grab the thread from Kate's hand, and fluttered up into the leaves above. There was another ruckus of cawing and flapping. Then somewhere farther in the distance some bird screeched, and then another.

As soon as she heard the distant screeches, the blue jay above let out a loud cry of her own, and Nasturtium hissed, "That's the warning! The dragon is out of his cave!" She dove under Sam's blanket, and Beechnut and Turgen scrambled to follow the others into safer cover.

Except for Nasturtium, who was completely hidden in the blanket, quivering, they all peeked out anxiously, gazing up at the darkening sky. Then the blue jay gave another harsh cry, and they saw an enormous flash of bright sulfur yellow sweeping overhead above the tall treetops.

"Yikes!" breathed Sam.

"Mama and Dad escaped from *that*?" whispered Kate, "They're even braver than I realized!"

Once more the dragon circled over the forest, returning to his gloomy mountain-top cave, and then finally the screeching of the birds quieted. After a moment the blue jay fluttered back down to the branch above the children.

"Thank you for the warning!" Kate said to the blue jay.

The bird replied, "No, thank *you*!" and then continued with something more that Kate and Sam could not understand.

Nasturtium licked down the fur that had been ruffled up under Sam's blanket, and translated, "She says her sister was able to fix the nest with the thread just in time. The eggs were saved. And now she wants to give you something in return."

The blue jay flew down to Kate and laid at her feet a small sprig of leaves with a few white berries attached.

"Oh. Umm, thank you," said Kate.

Sam whispered to her, "What is it?"

"Just a plant, I guess," Kate whispered back, "But Mama and Dad always said we should be grateful for any gift, even if it isn't our favorite thing." She picked up the little sprig and put it in her backpack.

The bird, meanwhile, had continued to caw, and Sam and Kate looked to Nasturtium for an explanation.

It was the tiger, however, who said in English, in his deep voice, “Bird come.”

“She wants to come with us,” added Nasturtium.

“She’s welcome to join us, but why does she want to?” asked Sam.

“She says if your parents stood up to the dragon they’re worth joining. She says he’s a bad influence on the entire mountain and forest.”

“But we don’t want to fight the dragon! We just want our parents back.”

“She says the dragon might still be after your parents, and she wants to help them.”

“Yikes!” Sam said again.

“We’ll need all the help we can get, I guess,” said Kate, “What’s her name?”

“Bluebell,” answered the cat.



In the morning there were no more sandwiches. There was cat food for Nasturtium and dog food for Turgen-teguli, but Kate and Sam had nothing left but the clementines that the supermarket had thrown away. They took one each, and although the fruit was delicious, the children prudently left the other four for lunch. Beechnut chattered something to Bluebell, and the two of them disappeared through the branches, looking for their own breakfasts.

Kate rubbed her stomach sadly, and sighed. She said, “As far as we know, Mama and Dad are still stuck in a deep crevice. I guess we should head around to the far side of the mountain and see if we can find it. I wonder whether we’ll get another letter from them today?”

“How could we get a special delivery letter in the middle of the wild forest?” demanded Sam.

“I don’t know. But it couldn’t hurt to look around.” Kate lifted up her backpack, and Sam looked beneath his. Sure enough, after a minute they found an iridescent green envelope under the corner of Sam’s blanket. They ripped it open and leaned close.

Tuesday Night

Dear Kate and Sam,

We are finally out of the crevice! We spent all day squeezing along the bottom of the deep ravine looking for a place we could climb up the sheer rock walls. Finally we spotted some long ropes dangling down from the top, and by using these we were able to shimmy up and pull ourselves out onto the forest floor again. Unfortunately, it turned out that these ropes were actually spun by giant spiders. We discovered this because it was already getting late again by then, and as we tried to move a safe distance from the edge of the crevice, we blundered into some of their monstrous webs. We are so tangled up that at present we can hardly move enough to write to you, and we do not know what will happen when the giant spiders find us in the morning. But don't worry; we'll figure out something.

As for yourselves, please be careful. We love you.

Love, Mama (and Dad)

Sam looked at Kate, and Kate looked at Sam.

Sam said, "Mama and Dad *definitely* need more rescuing than ever! I hope they're still okay! But this is from last night; what if they've already been eaten by monster spiders?"

"I'm sure they'll be fine, Sam," said Kate. But she did not look sure.

When Nasturtium noticed the children's worried voices she demanded, "Read it out loud!" After she had heard the message from Mama and Dad, she looked thoughtful. "We should keep heading around to the far side of the mountain, keeping an eye out for giant spiders. But we might meet your parents on the way. As soon as Beechnut and Bluebell get back maybe they can scout our way ahead of us."

...