



## STUCK IN THE MUD

**T**hey woke to rains so heavy that Fred could barely see his own hand when he held it out in front of him. The explorer had left fresh fish outside their doorway, but he was nowhere to be seen; there was only the white thundering smoke of the rain. It filtered through the roof and dropped on their faces. They crouched, bleak, waiting for it to stop. It did not. They grew steadily wetter.

'Let's go and hide under the statues,' said Fred. 'We can take the fish.'

They pelted across the square towards the far end, where the four vast statues stood. Baca let out a

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snuffling, mewling sound as Lila ran with him, her feet sliding in the mud.

Behind the statues, up against the wall, was a slight overhang, enough to shelter under. They crouched, all four in a line, watching the sky, and scaling the fish. Fred half expected the explorer to be there too, keeping dry, but there was no trace of him.

Fred threw a stone out into the downpour and watched it disappear into the wall of wet.

'Shall we do something?' said Lila. She offered Baca a handful of leaves from her pocket. Baca turned away and licked his damp fur. 'Let's go looking for food? Or, we could play something?'

Fred put down the fish he was scaling. 'Play what?' He was glad to stop working. The rain made the fish slippery, his hands were covered in nicks, and his fingernails were full of fish scales. His fingers, he saw, were calloused now, toughened over the past days.

'What game?' said Con. She sounded suspicious. 'I only know bridge, and we don't have any cards.'

'Bridge?' asked Lila.

Con looked defensive. 'We didn't play much at school. Or at least ... sometimes the others did. But I'm not usually ...' Her voice trailed off. 'I don't really want to. Aren't games for babies?'

'Do you know stuck in the mud?' asked Fred. 'It's like tag, only if you get touched, you freeze, until someone comes and crawls under your legs to set you free.'

'Out in that rain?' Con scratched a mosquito bite.

'We can't really get that much wetter,' said Fred, gesturing to his jersey. It was dripping on to the fish.

'All right.' Con jumped to her feet. 'Let's go!'

'You're it!' said Lila to Con.

It wasn't like any game of tag Fred had played before; it was more like swimming than running. They darted in and out of statues, slipping on the wet stone. The mud churned under their shoes and splattered all the way up to their waists. Rain got in their eyes and ears and mouths, and hammered down on their hands as they tried to lunge at each other.

Con ran awkwardly, with her heels hitting against her bottom, but her face was vivid with excitement.

'I didn't expect this game,' said Con, panting, 'to be so *literal*. I like it.'

They ran outwards, towards the trees of the jungle. Fred scrambled up two lianas to escape pursuit, one in each hand and his knees around both for balance, until Con lifted Max in her arms and he touched Fred's ankle with the tips of his fingers.

'You're stuck!' Max called. The rain hammered on his upturned face and slicked his eyebrows into shape.

Con put Max down. She doubled over. 'Wait! Fred! Lila! I think I might be dying.'

'What?' Lila skidded to a halt, throwing up an arc of mud.

'The side of my side! It's burning.'

'Like fire?'

'Yes!'

'And it's hard to breathe?'

'Yes!'

'That's just a stitch.'

'What?'

'How do you not know what a stitch is?' asked Max.

'That's so silly!'

'Shush, Max,' said Lila. She turned, calming Con's deep purple blush with her businesslike nod. 'It's just what happens when you run. The best thing you can do is take a fat branch in each hand and make a really strong fist around them.'

'Right! Thank you!'

'Does that work?' Fred asked. 'I've never heard of it.'

'Yes, it definitely works.' Con ran into the rain to find two sticks. Lila whispered, 'I don't know, actually. I just made it up. But it might, if you believe it will. That counts for something.'

Con reappeared, clutching a stick in each hand, her face pink with the effort of making a fist, straining as if she were trying to lay an egg. She thumped Fred on the shoulder. 'You're it!'

If ever there is a chance to play tag in the jungle in

a tropical storm, it is a chance worth taking. Years later, it would shine for Fred like a gold coin he carried with him.

It was the last day of light, before their days tore open.

