

## Monster – Leora Middleton

I tear through the woods, ignoring the thorns in my feet and the pain in my bleeding palms. I heave myself over a fallen tree trunk, sprint about thirty more metres before coming across a thicket bush. I don't need to stop and turn my head around to know that he is behind me, hot on my heels. I crouch down and crawl face-first into the nearest opening, dimly aware of needle-sharp brambles scratching my arms and sides.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are..."

I stop crawling, stone cold. He's right there, already. How did he get here so fast? I know I had at least a five minute head-start.

"Come out, kid... I know you're here..."

I don't move. I don't breathe. I don't even think.

"If you come out, I won't chase you anymore. I'll hide, and then you can find me."

Again, I stay silent.

My chest is pounding so hard I swear he can hear it from out there. What was I thinking? I'm trapped! If he finds me, he will tear open these brambles like some giant weed-hacker and pull me out. I know I have to get back to the house if I want to win this. But then I realize that I don't know where the house is. I hadn't been paying attention to my surroundings while he was chasing me, and I know I haven't been in this part of the woods before. Heck, I don't even know which direction the house is! I can't see the sun, so I don't know which way is east or west.

Through the small criss-crossed branches of the thicket, I can see him walking around, stealthily, but not too stealthily, because he wants me to know he is there. He's large, about the size of a small car. He looks like some sort of spider, with large bug-eyes, six long, pole-thin legs that make up most of his body, and two pincers coming out of the side of his wide mouth. I haven't seen him spin any webs, but he is very good at climbing trees, and he is a very good stalker.

He has now left to search for me elsewhere. Silence. I let out a breath that I didn't realize I was holding. I slowly crawl my way back out of the thicket, this time a little more careful to avoid the brambles. When I get out, I do a 360° turn-around to make sure he is really gone. Then I look up to sky and see the sun sitting lazily just above the horizon, meaning that it's about 5:00 pm. The house is roughly north-east, so by my calculations I just have to go....back the way I came from. I set off lightly, making sure I don't step on a dry leaf or pinecone that would announce my location.

I walk for ten minutes, and the area is slowly becoming more familiar. I recognize a boulder, and I vaguely remember seeing that mangled-looking tree over there. I'm getting so close, and there is no sign of him so far.

Suddenly, something doesn't feel right. Something is wrong. I stop walking and try to listen to my surroundings over the sound of my heart pumping in my chest. Don't panic, I think, trying to calm myself. He's nowhere around here. If he is, well I'm just gonna have to-

"Boo."

I let out a loud gasp, whirl around and try to step back but instead I clumsily trip and fall down backwards. There he is, towering over me.

I have lost.

I allow myself a few seconds to get my breathing fully under control, and then I tell him, "Congratulations."

He nods and says, "You did well, I actually couldn't find you for a long while. But then I-"

He stops and gets a closer look at me.

"Are you okay?" he asks with concern. He motions one of his legs toward me, helping me up, and he examines me head to toe. "What happened to your face? Did you crawl through a bramble bush again?"

"Yeah, I did."

“Maybe we shouldn’t play this game anymore. You take it so seriously. Let’s get you back to the house. You look terrible.”

We walk for ten minutes until we emerge from the woods and come across a large stretch of grass field, and at the end of it the house can just be seen. I have been thinking about our game. We have been playing it for almost three years now, ever since I found him in the woods. I had been exploring the area for the first time when I came upon him, sitting next to a small brook. I still don’t know why I wasn’t afraid of him when I first saw him, but I wasn’t. Maybe it was because when I approached him, he looked at me like I was an unfamiliar, possibly dangerous creature. We talked and asked each other questions all afternoon, and from that day he was my friend. A friend I couldn’t talk about, one I still cannot share with anyone. I know he is one of a kind, not accepted in his former life, and not accepted here, except by me.

I want to ask him a question before I leave for home. “What would happen if the other monsters found you?”

He stops walking.

“I.. I don’t know. They never liked me so much, because I was different. I don’t know if they would try and bring me back, to ‘fix’ me, to be more like them, or...” He trails off. “...or if they would be angry that I left.”

He turns to face me.

“But the other monsters live a long way from here, farther than you can imagine. They couldn’t find me if they tried looking.”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

He considers this for a moment. “Not really. I mean, I’ve got you, don’t I?”