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THE ANTS were having a nice, quiet day. But then came the rumbling. . . .

The ant family had been taking a walk around the block after a long, hard day of working on their farm. The father ant was telling his children about the harsh outside world where he had grown up. "When I was young, an ant had to keep one eye on his work and one eye on the giant humans around him," Father Ant said as they returned home. He could still remember horror stories of entire ant neighborhoods being squashed by a single tennis shoe or bicycle wheel. His son shook off a chill.

But not here. Life in a store-bought ant farm was peaceful. The ants lived in a glass box, where no person

could stomp on them or eat them or fry them with a magnifying glass. It was a world of work, sleep, and a wonderfully tangled network of tunnels. Ant heaven.

Father Ant leaned back in his lounge chair (half of a sunflower seed hull) and chuckled. His kids would never know the real fear of living on the outside.

All of a sudden, Mother Ant's favorite vase (the hollow thumb from a child's porcelain doll) fell off the mantel and shattered. She ran into the living room, wondering which of her children was responsible. But none of them had done it. So who or what *was* responsible?

Rumble. . . .

The ground shook underneath them. The first thought that came to Father Ant's mind was that a human was carrying the glass-enclosed ant farm somewhere. But when he peered through the glass, the world outside was not moving. The ground shook again, this time harder. Father Ant ran to his children and covered them with his body. The walls crumbled around them. The floor below their feet began to disappear, and the ants fell into the tunnel under their home. Sand threatened to bury them.

The rumbling got worse, and soon they were able to hear it clearly—a low, distant thunder that grew louder and louder every second. Father Ant scanned the area and discovered that the entire ant farm was caving in around them.

His son struggled to his side, and they both watched as something foreign came barreling toward them. Father couldn't make out what it was, but it looked almost like . . . a water-skier?

The family huddled together, gripped in fear—the same fear Father had experienced on the outside. As they looked at the figure coming toward them, it slowly took shape. Could it be? No. There's no way. . . . How? Was it . . . a human?

Father knew that shape. It was a human all right, but a tiny version—one that was no bigger than they were! No, wait, *two* humans . . . and they were skiing on the sand! Pulled by Ant Mildred, Uncle Fred Ant, and all their children! Their relatives had harnesses around their necks and were working in teams to pull along these two human children on the sand. And it looked like one of the kids—a boy—was actually having fun! How could he enjoy destroying their homes? What kind of human was this?

It was the Dylan Taylor kind. Dylan was a 12-year-old boy who never had an adventure he didn't like. He slid back and forth along the dunes. His younger sister, Jesse, was following along behind him, her face displaying utter terror.

"Banzai!" Dylan shouted as he jumped a "wave" of sand, performing a perfect back flip and landing on his feet.

Jesse veered to her right to avoid the wake. She was trying her best to make her ski run as unadventurous as possible. She was just hoping to hang on to the reins long enough for these ants to get tired and quit.

Dylan yelled, "Hey, Jess! Is this fun or what?"

Jesse didn't dare answer him; she might get distracted and crash. But in her head she yelled, *No!*

Dylan didn't even notice his sister's fear. "I knew you'd like it! Now hang on . . . 'cause here's where it gets really good!"

Suddenly, the ants up ahead of them disappeared down a steep ravine. Jesse's eyes bulged. They were flying off a cliff!

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" Jesse screamed.

The ground ended underneath them. Dylan leaned back and lifted the front of his ski board as high as it would go. The reins pulled tight and jerked him back down. A slight moment of fear, and then a rush of wind and sand hit him in the face. His eyes teared up, but he screamed with delight.

Jesse bent at the waist, closed her eyes, and prepared to crash. She hovered in midair for a split second and then was quickly pulled down.

The angle of the cliff was as steep as the side of a skyscraper. But somehow the kids didn't crash as their skis touched the ground and continued forward. Jesse's ponytail stuck straight out from the back of her head.

She opened one eye long enough to see the ants ahead of her scramble into a large hole and disappear.

Dylan and Jesse followed the ants into the hole. It led into a tunnel that twisted and turned like a water slide. Jesse's body was jerked back and forth until she couldn't take it anymore. She steered over to Dylan and leaped, climbing onto his back.

"Hey!" Dylan shouted.

Jesse kicked off her ski board and wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Get off!"

The force of their speed sent them high up into a steep turn.

"Jess! I can't see!" Jesse's hands covered her brother's eyes. Not that he could have seen anything anyway in the pitch-dark tunnel.

But then there was a light.

"We're leaving the tunnel!" Jesse yelled, choosing to give Dylan an update on the situation rather than move her arms and let him see for himself.

Out of her one opened eye, Jesse could see something she didn't want to see. Still at full speed, they were heading straight for a fence! The ants seemed unconcerned as they veered closer and closer to the fence.

Holding the reins with one hand, Dylan used his other hand to try to pry Jesse's hands off his eyes. But her hands were stuck there like suction cups.

"Look out!" Jesse screamed.

"My eyes!" Dylan shouted.

The ants barreled toward the fence and swerved to the right just inches from crashing into it. But the skiers couldn't make the turn.

Smash! They tore into the fence. Dylan let go of the reins, and he and Jesse were launched high into the air. Like platform divers, their bodies twisted and turned together. Jesse still hung tightly to Dylan's waist.

"Wooooooooooooah!"

Jesse closed her eyes. They both prepared for a jarring impact.

Boing!

Boing? How could there be a "boing" at the end of this fall? Why hadn't they felt the impact of the ground? Jesse opened her eyes and investigated. Dylan pulled Jesse's arm off his face and looked around.

They were caught in a giant net. It stretched from a tall green windmill over to a large green barn, and they were in the middle of the two. What luck!

"Jesse, are you OK?"

Her lips trembling, she managed to say, "Yeah, I think so. That whole thing was just so—"

"Awesome!" Dylan finished her sentence, but not in the way she'd intended. "Hey, let's get out of this net and try it again!"

The net had a strange texture to it. It was sticky. Jesse

peeled part of it off her leg, but then it stuck to her hands like chewing gum. Dylan struggled with it as well.

“What is this stuff?” he said.

Dylan thrashed around so much that he became more caught in the net than he’d been at first. He could barely move his arms. He thrust his hand forward, ripping the net but wrapping himself in it even more. Jesse realized she was getting more and more stuck and looked around for help. They were on an ant farm—perhaps there was a pitchfork or something lying around that they could use to free themselves. But as she surveyed the area, she realized something. She had seen this type of net before.

“Dylan . . . this isn’t a net. This is a spider web!” Jesse’s discovery gave her a new reason to get out of there quickly. No telling when the owner of this web would be back to check what had come home for dinner. She threw her arms around, getting herself more entangled.

“This ant farm didn’t come with spiders,” Dylan said, laughing off the possibility.

“It’s not funny, Dylan! Maybe a spider got inside somehow. We could both be—” She stopped when she saw Dylan’s face. He had suddenly grown concerned. He was looking over her shoulder at something. She slowly turned her head. A shadow fell over both of them. A dark, black, round shape appeared. It moved closer and closer.

"Oh, no!"

With the shadowy creature inching nearer, Dylan and Jesse flailed around to get free, but by this time they had gotten so entangled that they could barely move. They were powerless against the oncoming beast.

"Can't . . . get free!"

"It's getting closer!"

The black object moved slowly, almost teasing them. The shadows were fading, and Dylan was able to make out more detail—a head, a face, a nose, a pair of glasses. . . .

Glasses?!

"Aha!" the creature shouted.

It was Eugene Meltsner, a stern look on his face. He flipped a giant switch, and the web faded around them. They were back in their virtual reality chairs. Their imaginary adventure had come to an abrupt halt.

Dylan and Jesse swiveled their chairs around to face Eugene. He was standing at the edge of the room, pushing switches and turning knobs.

"Eugene!" said Jesse, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Oh, Eugene! For a second there we thought we were in big trouble!"

Eugene stepped closer, suddenly as threatening to them as the spider would have been. "Let me assure you both . . . you *are* in big trouble!"