

THE BUGALOOS & THE VILE VIBES

By Chris Stratton

CHAPTER ONE

Dawn came, as always in Tranquility Forest, gently and with the promise that today would be even better than yesterday, which was absolutely perfect. As the first rays of the sun filtered through the blossoms of her lily-pad pad, Joy opened her eyes and sprang up, wide-eyed, to greet the new day. She hovered a foot or two above the ground, gossamer wings fluttering easily, then came to rest and ran lightly outside.

A gentle breeze ruffled the leaves of the frangipani tree, wafting the fragrance of its red blossoms across the clearing the Bugaloos called home. At the sight of the sunny-faced girl, the orchids twined around the trunk of a live oak tree and opened their blossoms, each one begging to be plucked. Joy skipped toward the tree, reached a hand toward one of the most voluptuous of the flowers, then paused, listening.

Above her the birds were warbling their morning chorus, but amid the chirps and tweets Joy heard a raucous note that made her cover her ears. A dreadful sound, like a hack saw chewing through steel bars. She looked up, all around her, but couldn't find the source of the noise. Then she returned her attention to the orchid she had chosen - and before her eyes the flower's petals curled up, turned brown and dropped to the ground at her feet. One of the petals brushed against her toe and she jumped back; it left a burning sensation, as though she had stepped on a live coal.

Cautiously, Joy bent down to examine the dead orchid, and tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, my," she whispered, because she could hardly remember the last time she had ever felt so sad.

"And wot's your problem this morning?" a voice snapped in the girl's ear.

She turned quickly to see I.Q. leaning against a nearby tree, arms folded and his shoulder-length blond hair ruffled. There was no trace of his usual pleasant smile; in fact, I.Q. was actually scowling!

Joy pointed to the curled brown petals that now looked like nothing more than charred bits of paper. "Look," she said.

I.Q. ambled toward her and looked where she indicated. "So?" he remarked in a decidedly unpleasant manner.

Joy looked at I.Q. with a puzzled frown. She started to say something when again the raucous bird-cry echoed through the clearing. Once more Joy looked up, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. To her astonishment, I.Q. took no notice of the nerve-jangling sound.

"What in the world was that?" Harmony called from across the way, caught in the middle of a yawn. With his mouth wide open and eyebrows up, the expression on his coffee-colored face might have been comical if it hadn't been accompanied by a shudder that ran through his body and made his wings vibrate uncontrollably. He rose, unwillingly, a few inches from the ground and had a hard time coming back down. He looked behind him with a suspicious frown.

"What are you two talking about?" I.Q. asked irritably, stepping on the fallen orchid petals and crushing them to dust.

"Didn't you hear it?" Joy asked, suppressing a small cry of distress at I.Q.'s needless act.

"I heard a bunch of blasted birds, that's what I heard. Getting so a chap can't sleep mornings anymore."

"But...but..." Joy stammered. This wasn't like I.Q. at all! Imagine not wanting to wake up and enjoy every minute of a perfect day!

"Well I heard it," Harmony declared, walking over to join the other two. "It's like something out of my worst plots and schemes."

"Plots and schemes?" Joy asked.

"Dreams, ducks," Harmony explained. "Nightmares would be more like it."

"You two are off your noggins, both of you," I.Q. snorted.

At that moment a large, dark shape flew across the sun, casting a strange shadow over the clearing. Before the three Bugaloos could look up, a voice called down from the tree tops. "No, they're not! I heard it too." And with those words Courage swooped down to a landing beside them.

"Where've you been?" Harmony asked.

"Up early, lads and lass, to watch the sunrise and all that. Lovely. But I heard that terrible noise m'self, luvs, and I tell you it gave me the downright shivers."

"Well that makes three of you," I.Q. growled. He stalked away, fluttered his wings and quickly vanished among the trees.

"What's with him?" Courage asked. He wasn't a tall lad, topping Joy by a bare inch or so, but he had a sturdy, athletic build and a constant smile that not even his present look of concern could erase entirely.

"Feeling humpty-dumpty," Harmony replied.

Courage looked at him in surprise. "That's terrible; it doesn't really rhyme with grumpy."

Harmony cocked his head to one side, as though listening to a playback of his words. "I guess you're right; now what do you suppose made me say that?" He shook his head and smiled with embarrassment. "Rough and bumpy. That's better, isn't it? Yes, rough and bumpy."

"Much better," Courage agreed. "And it pretty well describes the air currents this morning, too."

"What do you mean?" Joy asked.

"Out there," he pointed skyward. "I ran into some pretty hairy turbulence a little while ago."

Harmony nodded sagely. "Crossing the shoreline from over the water; it can happen."

"But I wasn't anywhere near the water," Courage protested.

"Listen!" Joy exclaimed suddenly.

They all froze, rigid as statues, ears straining.

"I don't hear anything. Not out of the way," Courage said.

"That's what I mean," the girl explained. "That awful sound; it's gone."

"Or holding its tongue," Harmony ventured.

Joy turned back to the live oak with its twining orchids and, with a trembling hand, reached toward a succulent blossom. This time the flower fairly leapt from its perch, and with a little laugh of relief Joy tucked it into her hair.

"Well, I'm for a bit of breakfast," Courage announced, and the others agreed. In a few minutes, the little disturbances were forgotten, and when I.Q. returned he was smiling sheepishly.

Breakfast over, I.Q. and Courage took the dishes to the stream at the far edge of the clearing to wash them - careful, of course, to use non-polluting natural soap flakes - while Joy donned an apron and began dusting her lily-pad pad. Harmony ambled over to his organ, which was fashioned from a giant calabash, and began noodling over the keys. Joy glanced in his direction and smiled; music always made her daily housekeeping tasks painless.

Pain, in fact, was almost unknown in Tranquility Forest. True, there were those who were jealous of the Bugaloos and their happy, carefree existence, and from time to time the peace of their sylvan home was disturbed by those troublemakers. But, as Harmony once observed, those incidents merely served to keep them on their "buttons and bows" - toes, that is.

No one knew exactly how Tranquility Forest came to be; for that matter, not even the Bugaloos could say how far it extended. On one side of it there was a vast, endless beach of the purest sand, with gentle ocean waves rolling in ceaselessly to break precisely the way the most demanding surfer would like it. On another side of the Forest was Rock City - but more of that later. In the other directions, however, Tranquility Forest apparently went on forever, and nowhere in it was a creature or plant that knew anything but happiness. Plants happy? Well, yes. In fact, one of the delightful aspects of Tranquility Forest was that certain trees and flowers had developed voices so they could express their feelings.

At this moment, the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower was humming along with Harmony's soft playing. This remarkable plant bloomed near the organ and consisted of a huge bell-shaped flower, which could produce an astonishing range of notes - much like a carillon - and a cluster of grapes with what seemed to be human faces. They not only provided a pleasing choral accompaniment to the Bugaloos' music, but the vine to which they were attached extended everywhere to bring news to the Bugaloos' clearing.

"Skre-e-e-e!" Harmony's organ suddenly shrieked.

"Klank!" went the Bluebell Flower.

Harmony looked at his hands, then at the Bluebell Flower.

"Good grief!" came a cry from the far side of the clearing, and Sparky leaped from his palm leaf hammock to run wildly around in an obvious state of panic. Not that Sparky was a stranger to panic. Part boy and mostly firefly, his curly mop of orange hair often stood on end at the slightest unusual sound, and right now the bulb that protruded from his backside was blinking furiously.

"I say, Harmony," Joy called, "must you?"

"I didn't mean it," Harmony replied. Tentatively he pushed down a key, and the note that came out was normal. The Bluebell Flower bonged out a deep, rolling tone. Sparky stopped running in circles and edged toward the organ.

"Whatcha doin', huh? Whatcha doin'?" he asked excitedly.

Harmony shook his head and tried a chord. Everything seemed all right. He glanced at Sparky and grinned. "At least it woke you up, lazy bones."

"Is it late?" Is it late?" Sparky looked around, then up at the sun. "It's late," he admitted ruefully. "I wonder what's the matter with me. I couldn't seem to wake up."

"What's the matter with all of us?" Joy asked, taking off her apron as she approached. "Was that just a sour note you played, Harmony?"

"I...I don't think so. I was just going through this..." He played a bar of music. "See? That was the way it was supposed to be. But something else..." His voice trailed off.

Sparky puffed up his chest and smiled knowingly. "Here, I know what the trouble is. You just have a clogged stop." He pushed up to the keyboard and tried to play a simple tune, but this time the grating sounds were clearly the product of his clumsy fingers. Joy and Harmony covered their ears and grimaced.

"That's enough," Joy protested. Sparky stepped away, abashed.

"Well...I was just trying to fix it for you," he said. "I may not be a musician - but then, few mechanical geniuses are."

Courage and I.Q. sauntered up from the stream to the bandstand with bemused smiles on their faces.

"If you're working out something far out, warn us first, won't you?" I.Q. said.

"Honest, chaps, I didn't mean it," Harmony laughed.

"I hope not," Courage said fervently as he slipped onto the giant toadstool behind his drums. Picking up his sticks, he beat a light tattoo on the snare, which looked for all the world like half a watermelon. "Let's have a go at something we can all get into."

Shortly the Forest was ringing with the rocking sound of the Bugaloos' music, and by the time they finished the number the sky above them was thick with hovering birds attracted by the song. I.Q. drew out a long, quavering note from his guitar and looked up.

"Hey! There's an idea." He put down his instrument and launched himself skyward. In a moment, he was joined by the others, and they soared and fluttered above the treetops with joyful abandon.

"Look at me! I'm a hummingbird!" Courage cried as he darted toward a giant palm and hovered with his nose just touching a ripe coconut.

"And I'm a whirly-bird!" Harmony yelled, beating his wings in awkward circles and making helicopter noises.

"I'm a seagull!" The others looked over at I.Q. and laughed as he sailed slowly through the air, arms held wide and bent at the elbow like the wings of a drifting kittiwake.

"I'm falling!" Joy shouted.

Courage started to laugh - until he saw the girl struggling, flailing the air in a frantic but futile effort to stay aloft. And then, as the boys watched in horror, she lost all control and plummeted to the earth below

CHAPTER TWO

Sparky heard the cries above him and looked up just as Joy began to fall. "Oh my, oh gosh," he muttered fearfully, chewing on a fingernail. "Come on, boys; help her!"

But the boys were too far away to reach the girl in time, that was painfully clear. To his credit, Sparky didn't hesitate any longer. He quickly stripped off the jacket of his brilliant purple suit to reveal small but perfectly adequate wings. Sparky didn't go in much for flying, even though he didn't like being left alone on the ground when his friends went skylarking. Heights, he explained, did funny things to his middle ear - or something.

"Hang on!" he yelled. "Sparky to the rescue!" He gave a mightily leap upward - and nearly fell right back. Stiff from disuse, his wings beat with all the creaking effect of a windmill on a windless day. With an enormous effort, he kept himself barely aloft, however, and moved as fast as he could toward the falling girl.

Holding out his stumpy arms, he strained to catch her. For a moment, it looked as though he was going to miss, but with a last, spasmodic flutter of his wings he managed to clutch an arm and pull her toward him. They were no more than a few feet from the ground, and Joy's momentum threatened to send them both crashing. Sparky struggled frantically, but it was no use.

"I'm sorry," he moaned. "We're both goners." He closed his eyes as the earth rushed up to meet them.

There was a jolt that took his breath away - but it came from above, not below. Sparky thought his legs were being pulled off. When he screwed up the courage to open his eyes, he saw that Courage and Harmony each had one of his feet and were gently lowering him, with Joy still in his grasp, to the green turf in the clearing.

For a moment Sparky lay and just shook. He heard laughter, but he didn't care. He was safe. And so was Joy. Joy? He snapped his eyes open.

She was seated on the ground close to him, taking deep breaths of relief. Now she looked over at him and smiled shakily. "Thank you, thank you, dear Sparky," she said. "But it's really all right to let go now."

Sparky looked at the hand that still clutched the girl's arm. It looked remarkably like one of his, but there seemed to be nothing he could do about making it open and relinquish its grasp. "I'm...I'm afraid I can't," he stammered.

"Here, let me," I.Q. said, kneeling beside them. With a good deal of prying he managed to pull Sparky's hand away from Joy's arm, leaving clear imprints in her flesh of the firefly's fingers. "You're going to have a nasty bruise," I.Q. remarked.

"I don't think she'll be complaining," Harmony said.

Joy laughed. "You're jolly well right about that!" Impulsively, she leaned over to kiss Sparky on the cheek. "My hero," she said, and got to her feet.

Sparky blushed furiously, and his tail light glowed a marvelous sunset pink. "Well..." he began. He cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Of course. Nothing to it, really." He stood up, glad to find his trembling legs would support him. "In fact," he went on, puffing his chest out, "that's just like a stunt I created when I was with the circus. Did I ever tell you chaps about my circus days?"

The boys managed not to groan, but their expressions clearly said that they had indeed heard about Sparky's circus days. If Sparky had done all the things he boasted about, he would have had to be at least seven hundred years old - probably twice that. Joy, however, was too full of gratitude to do anything but indulge the firefly at this point, and she encouraged him to go on.

"Yes. Well, you've undoubtedly heard of the Great Zucchini, world's foremost aerialist? Trapezes and all that sort of thing. Taught him all he knew, of course, but I didn't mind his hogging...uh-h...taking the spotlight. Good-looking chap, if you like the type. At any rate, one day the poor fellow fell during his act. Not his fault; a rope broke. Fortunately, I was on the ground nearby, and without hesitating I threw off my clown suit - I mean

my uh-h...ringmaster's uniform - and zoomed up to catch him. Brought him down light as a feather, safe as a babe in arms. Well, I don't have to tell you that the audience simply ate it up. Really, I was sore for a week from taking bows. After that, the spectacular Sparky Firefly Flight for Life was the premier attraction of five continents and..."

"Bully for you," Courage put in. "But look, mates, we've got a bit of a problem on our hands."

"Problem?" Sparky asked, slightly miffed.

"Yes, I'd have to say so," I.Q. agreed.

Tentatively, Joy fluttered her wings and hovered a few inches off the ground. "Everything's fine now," she said.

Courage nodded, his expression serious. "Yes. Now. But a few minutes ago, you were nearly a goner, luv."

The girl shivered and came back to earth. "What do you suppose happened?" she asked with a worried frown.

"Suppose you tell us," I.Q. suggested. "What made you lose control like that?"

Joy chewed her lip as she tried to recall exactly how the near-disaster had come about.. "It was...it was very strange."

"I dare say," I.Q. said wryly.

"No, no. I mean...well, there I was, just flying about, quite normally, watching the rest of you, when suddenly it was as though...as though I'd lost my wings altogether."

"But you didn't," Harmony put in, pointing to the gauzy appendages sprouting from her shoulder-blades.

"No, of course not. I knew I had them all right, and that they were still working normally, but for some reason they had no effect. It felt almost as if they had...had millions of holes in them. Like a sieve!"

Sparky hopped around behind the girl and examined her wings closely. "Nope," he announced. "No holes." Then, remembering, he hurried to retrieve his jacket and put it back on.

"Hm-m," I.Q. said thoughtfully. "That sounds as though you may have run into a pocket of super-light air. No resistance, you know." The others could almost hear the computer clicking inside his head.

"But then we all would have fallen," Harmony pointed out. "Why just Joy?"

"You're right, of course," I.Q. agreed. "I was merely theorizing." He shook his head. "I really can't explain it."

"Do you think it might have some connection with the other things that have happened today?" Joy asked.

"Other things?" I.Q. asked.

"You know. That...that awful bird cry. The orchid. And even...well, even the way you were for a little while there," she added hesitantly.

I.Q.'s eyebrows shot up and the twin knobbed antennae on top of his head quivered. "I? The way I was?" He smiled indulgently. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"You were a bit offish this morning," Courage put in.

"I was? Oh, I do recall being a bit annoyed when you all insisted you heard some sort of strange noise. Having me on, weren't you?"

"Not on your trouble and strife," Harmony insisted. "We all heard it. Except you. And don't forget that ungroovy note I hit on my organ. Even Sparky couldn't make a sound like that on it."

"Harmony's right," Courage said. "And if you didn't hear that squawk, I.Q., that's something else to think about."

I.Q. looked as though he were about to make some retort, but he kept his silence.

Joy shivered. "Do you...do you think something...bad is happening, Courage?"

He nodded. "It looks that way, luv; there's no hiding our heads in the sand." He looked around the clearing. The sun was high in the sky now, and everything appeared normal.

"Let's turn on the wireless," Harmony suggested, picking up a transistor set from the top of the organ. "If there's some kind of emergency going on they're bound to be broadcasting the details."

"If they can get that barmy disc-jockey to stop yakking," I.Q. said, his words almost lost as the words spilled out of the radio.

"...the paramount pick of all you pretty people out there in stereo land this week. This is your own groovy great guy, Peter Platter, presenting The Power Failures with their smasheroo hit You Turn My Lights Off, Baby!"

Harmony winced and turned down the volume as a blast of music filled the air in eardrum-throbbing assault.

"Business as usual," I.Q. remarked.

"Wait a bit, mates," Courage said. "Keep that volume down till the number's over; then we'll listen."

After what seemed an eternity, Harmony cautiously put his ear to the radio's speaker. "It's safe now," he announced, and turned the volume back up.

"...if that doesn't grab you, kids and cats, you're just not with it, you dig me? Now don't go 'way, cuz your own Rock Guru has hours and hours of wacked-out sounds for you, right after this message..."

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" Sparky was jumping up and down so excitedly that he nearly knocked the radio out of Harmony's hand.

"Hold it!" Courage commanded. "Listen." They all put their ears close to the transistor as Peter Platter's voice came through loud and clear. "...to cure heartburn, dropsy, athlete's foot, warts, AND...pre-exam jitters! Believe me, kids, this stuff has got it. Take it from ME, the best friend you ever had, that Mother Sackett's Nickelodeon

Salve is the most miraculous product ever in this age of mind-grabbing miracles. Dig it? You bet your favorite LP you do! Okay, gang, now here's Peter Platter's personal pick of the day. Wrap your ears around this golden goodie by the Grave Diggers - Shovel Off to Buffalo!"

Harmony groaned and flicked off the radio. "Nothing doing there."

"The whole city could be going up in flames and he'd still be spinning those ghastly discs," I.Q. remarked sourly.

"Flames? What? Where?" Sparky jumped up and looked around, his tail bulb winking nervously.

"Never mind, Sparky," Courage calmed him. "It looks as though the trouble, whatever it is, hasn't hit Rock City."

"Not yet," I.Q. said.

"Courage?" Joy said.

"Yes."

"Are you sure...could it be that we're taking all this too seriously?"

For answer, Courage glanced pointedly at the bruise left by Sparky's fingers on the girl's arm.

"I know," she said, "but maybe I.Q. is right about that. It was just one of those freaky air currents or something."

"I'd like to believe it," Courage said slowly, as though trying to convince himself.

"She may be right," Harmony chimed in. "After all, what's happened, really? A crazy bird sound, a sour note on the organ..."

"No more since I fixed it," Sparky piped up. He was obviously anxious to believe that all was well in Tranquility Forest.

Harmony grinned and patted the little firefly on the head. "Sure, you fixed it all right."

"Well..." Courage said. "Maybe we are getting worked up over nothing."

"Yes," I.Q. agreed. "Everything can be explained."

"It was just a bad morning," Joy said.

Harmony strode to the organ and sat down, fingers poised over the keyboard. "This calls for a little disaster music," he announced with a chuckle. He played a heavy, throbbing chord, and Courage headed for his drums. But before he had taken two steps, he stopped short and clapped his hands over his ears.

"Hey! Easy on the volume, Harmony!"

Harmony looked around, his hands lifted clear of the keyboard. "What's wrong..." And he, too, put his hands over his ears, screwing his eyes shut as a wave of sound washed over the clearing with a force that made them all quiver.

"Look!" Joy shouted, pointing to a palm tree at the edge of the clearing.

The tree had a curving trunk that leaned sharply inward, but now, before the eyes of the Bugaloos, the trunk was vibrating like a giant guitar string - and it was slowly straightening! Above the deep, booming sound came the crash of violently shaking leaves. A bunch of fronds broke loose and spun to the ground. Coconuts dropped off and thudded against the turf like giant hailstones, and, as the Bugaloos watched in amazement, a deafening CURRACK! reverberated through the clearing and the palm began to topple slowly toward them.

"Look out!" Sparky shrieked, and scampered in panic directly toward the spot where the tree was falling. Courage dashed after him and pulled him aside just as the palm crashed to the ground.

"Watch it, lad," Courage cautioned, holding the struggling firefly.

Sparky looked up at Courage. "Are you all right? I saved you, didn't I?"

Courage smiled. "Yes, Sparky. You saved me."

"What in the world caused that?" I.Q. wondered, moving cautiously toward the fallen tree. It stretched almost all the way across the clearing, and its base was sheared off as though a huge razor had sliced through it.

"Beats me," Courage admitted, scratching his head.

"Try explaining that," Harmony said.

I.Q. shook his head. "I can't...but maybe I can."

"How's that?" Courage asked.

"Trouble in Tranquility Forest. Right?"

The others nodded soberly.

"And every time we've had trouble here...who's been the cause?" I.Q. went on.

Harmony snapped his fingers. "Of course! Uh-h..."

"If you can think of a cockney rhyme for Benita Bizarre, I'll eat my suspenders," I.Q. declared with a grin.

Once more, again, Harmony snapped his fingers. Then he sighed. "Keep your pants on," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Benita?" Joy asked.

"Who else?" I.Q. replied.

"Benita," Courage stated flatly. "She's behind all this, no question. What's the scurvy witch got up her sleeve now?"

CHAPTER THREE

The only thing Benita Bizarre had up her sleeve at that moment was her arm, and the hand at the end of it was busily punching buttons on her Top Forty Instant Rock Analysis Computer. "I've got it! I've got it!" she gloated. Her nose - somewhat oversized and so sharply pointed that she might have had an outstanding career as a thumb-tack - seemed to twitch like that of an excited rabbit. Her enormous headdress of scarlet feathers fluttered in time to the music that poured from speakers all over the room, and her matching midi-mini dress - below her knees but slit up the middle to reveal her spindly shanks - shimmered in the light cast by multi-colored neon tubing.

If the room looked remarkably like the interior of a jukebox, with its giant turntable and records as big as Benita, it was because that was what it was. Some people dig music and some dig it a lot, but Benita was a witch obsessed by it. For a solid week, she had been taping every record played on Station KOOK and feeding the notes into the computer, and now she was on the verge of discovering The Secret.

"It is ready, mein vitchy?" Funky asked, hovering near her shoulder. A combination butler, chauffeur, and control room engineer for the Witch of Rock City, Funky had a disposition to go with his appearance, which was that of a huge cringing rat.

"Shut up," Benita snapped. "I'm creating." She pushed a button and held her breath as the machine began blinking its lights and making rapid clicking noises. "This is it," she whispered, clapping her hands in excitement. "The moment of truth. Every note of every hit is on tape in there, and this machine has analyzed them all with

its super electronic brain. I push this gizmo here" - she poked at a small lever near the slot - "and here comes the formula!"

The blinking and clicking increased in tempo alarmingly. A green light winked rapidly; wisps of smoke began to curl up from the back of the gleaming machine. Out of the slot came a piece of paper, ejected with such force that it sailed halfway across the room. Benita scrambled after it and tripped over flunky Funky as he hastened to help her. They both went down in a tangle of arms and legs. (And paws, of course.)

"Get out of the way, you clumsy dunderhead!" the witch snarled.

The rat mumbled a craven apology and got to his feet, brushing at the sleeve of his second-hand Storm Trooper uniform.

"Where's the formula? The formula! The formula!" Benita scabbled around on her hands and knees, squinting myopically as she searched for the precious paper.

Funky scratched his nose, shrugged and bent down to detach the sheet of paper from where it was impaled on the spike heel of Benita's shoe. "Here, Boss," he said.

The witch wheeled and snatched it from him, turning it this way and that as she tried to make out the single line of tiny print.

"What does it say? What does it say?" Funky crowded his proboscis over Benita's shoulder, trying to get a look.

"Get away, get away," the witch growled, shoving him away with an elbow. "It says...WHAT!?!?" "What?!?"

Benita shook the paper. "It says...Your grace and charm eclipse the most beautiful of sunsets..."

The witch crumpled the piece of paper and flung it on the floor. Then she strode to the computer and gave it a vicious kick. "I spend a fortune on this thing, and what is it? Nothing but a lousy fortune cookie!"

She turned on Funky. "Throw this thing out of here. I don't want to see it any more, ya got it? Who needs a machine when I got a brain that..." She tapped the side of her head so vigorously that she winced.

"That...anyway, get rid of it."

"Yah, mein Genius," the rat fawned. He began to fumble at the rear of the machine when the front door of the Jukebox Penthouse opened and an unlikely pair of creatures entered, obviously excited.

"Benita! Benita!" the taller one cried. He was called Tweeter, and he had a body that looked like a stereo speaker and hair made of tangled extension cords. His companion, Woofer, was similar but shorter, and both had the dazed look that comes from being constantly bombarded by electronic sounds all their lives.

"Now what is it?" the witch snapped. She was at the controls of her Super-Heterodyne AM-FM Transistor Set, dialing in Station KOOK.

"It's the..." Tweeter gulped in his excitement as he tried to stammer out the words.

"It's the Bugaloos!" Woofer blurted out, waving his stubby arms.

"The insects?" Benita cried in disbelief.

"That's right," Tweeter affirmed.

"What about 'em?" the witch demanded.

"They're here! They're at the door!" Tweeter turned to look at the door behind him as he spoke, as though he feared the unexpected visitors were hot on his heels.

Funky drew himself up to attention and clicked his heels. "I vill handle dis, Boss," he announced. "If dey're looking for trouble, dey'll get it! Ve'll zap 'em!"

Benita frowned and waved a restraining hand. "Wait a minute. The Bugaloos, eh?" She curled a forefinger around her pointy chin as she pondered the tidings. "Well. Whaddya suppose they're doing here, huh?"

"They ain't sellin' magazine subscriptions," Woofer said.

"Und dey're not inviting you to sing mit deir group," Funky said before he had time to think.

Benita stiffened and glared at the rat, lifted her arm and was about to swing at him. Funky cringed, but the blow didn't come. When he dared to look at the witch again, he saw that she was thinking. Thinking hard. He could tell by the way her eyes were crossed as she stared off into space.

"I really don't feel right about leaving Sparky alone in Tranquility Forest," Joy was saying.

"What can happen to him there?" Harmony asked. He was at the wheel of the Bugaloo Buggy, a jaunty, colorful runabout that tooted swiftly through the garish streets of Rock City.

"Anyway," I.Q. put in from the back seat, "Sparky won't go anywhere near Benita Bizarre. Not if he can help it."

"I suppose you're right," Joy agreed, but she didn't seem entirely convinced. "Still...all those terrible things that have been happening there..." She shook her head uncertainly.

"Once we get hold of Benita the Bad, there'll be no more of that," Courage declared.

"I still don't think we should just go barging in on her like this," I.Q. said.

"We don't have any other choice," Courage insisted.

"I'm with you," Harmony chimed in as he slowed to make a sharp turn. "Whatever that old hag is up to, it's dangerous, and there's no time for messing around. Right?"

Courage nodded vigorously. "Right. Here we are, then."

The car drifted to a halt in front of...yes, a monstrous jukebox, its front a mass of red and purple and orange and green neon lights that bubbled and winked and shimmered blindingly. The way was blocked by a curious fan-shaped gate that was as colorful as the jukebox itself. Harmony looked at it and scratched his head.

"I've never been in the old witch's den by the front way before. How do we get in?"

"Awk-k! Ten cents for one admission. Three for a quarter."

The raucous voice came from directly above them, and the Bugaloos looked up, startled. The head of a giant bird, its size matched by its incredible ugliness, protruded from the front of the Jukebox Penthouse, and now the visitors saw that the fan-shaped gate was really the bird's feathers.

"A...a giant peacock!" Joy gasped.

"What else?" I.Q. shrugged. "Only Benita could find one as repulsive as this one." As he spoke, I.Q. was scanning the gaudy facade of the jukebox. Satisfied, he nodded and stood up in the back seat.

"Where're you going?" Courage asked.

"Have you got a dime on you? I've got the quarter."

Courage produced the silver and they all watched as I.Q. soared up to hover beside a giant slot near the bird's head. He dropped in the coins, and by the time he returned to the Bugaloo Buggy, the peacock had obligingly folded up its spectacular plumage.

As soon as the Bugaloos had passed inside the Jukebox Penthouse, the feathers closed behind them. Joy looked back and shivered. It was the first time she had ever come to Benita Bizarre's garish headquarters, and for a moment she wished she had stayed back in Tranquility Forest with Sparky. But only for a moment. She looked around at the other three and smiled. Nothing really bad could happen as long as they were together...could it?

"No, no, you stupid rodent!" Benita shrieked. "Put that down; if they need zapping we'll zap 'em later."

Funky was pointing the witch's ultimate weapon - her Stereo Zapper - at the doorway as they waited for the Bugaloos, but now he lowered it with obvious reluctance. "Vy not just a little zap, mein Leader?" he whined. "Just..." He held up a paw. "Just this much?"

Benita stalked across the room and snatched the Zapper from him, then backhanded him across the snoot. The rat cowered against the door of the control booth that overlooked the giant turntable.

"Don't give me any arguments!" the witch snapped. "Do what I tell you for once." She strode back across the room to a purple-and-orange divan, where she arranged herself in what she considered to be a seductive pose. Funky stayed near the outer door, while Woofer and Tweeter hovered near Benita, looking apprehensive and puzzled.

"Dey are comink!" Funky whispered.

"Well let 'em in, let 'em in," Benita ordered.

Funky poked a button and the metal doors slid open soundlessly just as the Bugaloos reached for it. For a moment, they stood in the doorway - Courage and Harmony in the lead, the other two just behind them. Benita was elaborately ignoring them as she perused the latest copy of *The Grooviest - Top Platters, Music, Lyrics & Unidentifiable Sounds*.

Courage looked at the witch, then at the rat who was bowing obsequiously nearby. He wasn't impressed. Across the room, Woofer nudged Benita worriedly.

"Psst!" he hissed, indicating the visitors.

Benita looked up slowly, a sickeningly sweet smile distorting her Grand Canyon of a mouth. "Why...I do believe it's my dear friends the ins-the Bugaloos," she cooed, and rose to her feet.

Unfortunately, at her first step she tripped over a stray length of coaxial cable and almost fell on her nose. She whirled on her flunkies. "What drizzlewit left that there?" She kicked viciously at the cable and missed, losing her balance and falling backward on the divan. By the time she untangled herself and was on her feet again, Tweeter had whisked the offending cable out of sight.

Through all this the Bugaloos simply stood and watched. I.Q. looked at the witch, then at Joy. He pointed to his head and twirled his forefinger in a small circle. Joy grinned and nodded. It was foolish to be afraid of this nitwit of a witch. Or was it? She couldn't help taking a backward step as Benita approached them.

"Whaddya want...I mean, what can I do for you?" The witch was obviously struggling to repress her usual ill temper.

Courage stepped forward. "We want to know what you've been doing to Tranquility Forest," he blurted out.

Benita raised her eyebrows and pointed at her breast with a bony finger. "Me? I? Doing to Tranquility Forest? What in the...whatever are you talking about?"

Harmony had been examining the room with a questing eye, and when he spotted the computer he pointed to it. "That must be it," he stated.

Benita looked around, startled.

"What, what?" she asked.

"I don't know what it is," Harmony said, "but I'll bet it's the machine she uses to mess things up for us."

"Oh, that," Benita said, dismissing the suggestion with a wave of her hand. "That's just a computer - and a rotten piece of junk it is."

"Yah. Rotten," Funky chimed in.

The skepticism was plain on the faces of the Bugaloos, so Benita invited them with a gesture to follow her to the machine. "Go ahead, take a look. I don't know what you're talking about, kiddies, but if this thing is messing anybody up, it's me." She kicked the computer, which immediately began blinking and clicking again. Another piece of paper shot out, but this time Benita managed to snatch it out of the air before it got away.

"Vat does it say dis time, Boss?" Funky asked.

Without a word, the witch shoved the paper under his ample nose.

"Vass iss das...Tilt?" Funky asked.

"Forget it," Benita snapped, crumpling the paper and flinging it to the floor. "Now," she said, turning back to the Bugaloos with a touch of impatience, "what was it you were saying?"

Before anyone could reply, an ear-shattering alarm bell began to clang. Red lights started pulsing in all parts of the room and the floor seemed to be shaking.

"Blimey!" Harmony exclaimed. "What's that?"

Benita smiled distractedly. "Omgosh. It's time!" She leaped across the room in long, awkward strides, waving frantically at her flunkies. "Woofer! The tape recorder! Tweeter! Get that stupid radio turned on. Funky! The computer...yeah, yeah, we'll give it one more chance."

While the Bugaloos looked in bewilderment at the sudden spurt of activity, someone turned off the alarm system. The flunkies stood at their posts, carrying out their assigned duties, as Benita draped herself on the divan again, head cocked to one side.

"Now what?" Harmony demanded. "What's all this about, anyway?"

Benita glanced at him. "Sorry, kids. It's time for Peter Platter's Listener's Lyrics Contest winners." The witch tee-heed and hugged herself. "Goodie. Maybe this'll be the day he plays my very own words and music." She glared momentarily at the huge radio nearby. "It better be," Benita growled.

Courage looked at I.Q., and they both shrugged. The witch's obsession with being a composer of rock music was known to all of them, and more than once their ears had been assaulted by her horrendous music and tasteless lyrics when she had been able to coerce the local disc jockey into broadcasting her tapes. No one ever asked the station to play Benita's bombs again.

"Now look, ma'am," I.Q. began, but the witch shushed him.

"Quiet!" Her eyes were fixed on the red sweep second hand of an electric clock high on a wall as it neared the vertical. Her hand was raised high, and now she brought it down smartly to Tweeter. "Volume!"

The room was suddenly filled with noise so loud that the Bugaloos could feel it was a physical force. Joy covered her ears, while the boys hunched their shoulders against the assault of decibels.

"Not so loud, you crummy banjo brain!" Benita shrieked. It was a miracle that she could be heard at all above the din, but if anyone could do it, it was Benita.

The volume was turned down until the sound was recognizable as the voice of Peter Platter spewing his usual machine-gun patter.

"...time to lay some groovy new lyrics on ya, folks. Today it's..." Suddenly the disc jockey was silent, and when he spoke again there was heartfelt pleading in his voice. "Now look, lads and dads, yummys and mummies, all you cats listening out there, you gotta send me more entries for this daily contest, you dig?" The sound of his swallowing hard came clearly over the air. "Today's winner is...well, Benita Bizarre."

"Yowee!" The witch leaped from her divan and twirled around the room. "I knew it! I knew that platter head would recognize talent if it was shoved in his face often enough!" She stopped and returned to the divan.

"Quiet," she ordered - although no one else had made a sound.

"...the only entry received for today's competition," Peter Platter was saying dolefully. "So, I'm just gonna step outside a minute, folks, while my engineer spins this disc for ya. He's deaf. Happy...uh-h...listenin'."

"What?!" Benita looked at her flunkies. "What was he saying?"

There was no reply as a sickening discord crashed through the radio speaker. Funky cringed - as well he might, since he was the one playing lead guitar.

Suddenly the so-called music was interrupted by a loud, jarring "Squa-a-a-w-w-k-k!" Everyone jumped, and Joy clapped her hand to her mouth.

"What's the matter with the radio?" Benita demanded. "Fix it," she ordered Tweeter. But the flunky, after fiddling with the dials for a moment, looked over helplessly at the witch.

"It's not us. It must be him," Tweeter nodded at the radio as though the deejay were inside somewhere.

Meanwhile, the unbearable squawking sound continued without letup. Joy looked at Courage. "That's it," she whispered intensely. "The noise we heard in the Forest this morning. Isn't it?"

Courage nodded grimly. "It certainly sounds like it."

They looked cautiously at Benita, whose distress was obvious. "Maybe we were wrong about her after all," Joy ventured.

Harmony glanced at the radio. "You think it's that nutty disc jockey doing that on purpose?"

Courage pondered the question for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "It doesn't seem likely. Benita's music is bad enough as it is without his going to all that trouble."

"Besides," I.Q. put in, "if that's the noise the rest of you said you heard, it wasn't coming out of any radio this morning. Right?"

The others nodded.

"Squa-a-w-k!" went the radio speaker.

Harmony looked at the witch skeptically. "She may not be causing that racket," he said, "but how about the other things?"

"I think..." Courage began. "I think maybe we'd better get over to the station and see what Peter Platter knows about this business."

"And if he doesn't?" Joy asked.

"Then I'd say we all had a bit of a problem on our hands."

CHAPTER FOUR

Ignoring the cries of protest at their departure, the Bugaloos hurried down to their car and headed toward Radio Station KOOK across town. They had gone only a few blocks when Joy tapped Harmony on the shoulder. "They're after us," she said, pointing toward the rear. Harmony glanced back quickly, then hunched lower over the wheel of the Bugaloo Buggy and concentrated on his driving.

"What do they want with us, anyway?" Courage asked, his gaze fixed on the outlandish purple-and-orange limousine (obviously Benita's favorite colors) that was charging recklessly in their wake.

"I'm not certain they're after us at all," I.Q. observed. "There's only the rat with her, and he's driving; she didn't bring the others along at all."

"Could she be going the same place we are?" Joy asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me," I.Q. replied.

They reached the station a few minutes later and parked in front of the low, round building that looked like a hamburger with an intricate antenna towering above it. As the Bugaloos got out of their car, Benita's Baroque Buggy skidded to a halt barely an inch behind them. The sudden stop threw the witch sharply forward, and she routinely cuffed the rat-chauffeur across the back of his head.

"You lame-brain! How many times do I have to tell ya? I don't care how fast you go, but stop slow!"

"Ya, ya mein vitchie," Funky said, straightening his cap and hopping out to the sidewalk to open the door. But the witch was in too much of a hurry to wait; she was already starting to climb over the side of the open limousine. Part of the long feather boa she wore became entangled in the door handle, and while she and the rat struggled to free her, the Bugaloos made their way inside the radio station.

"...little technical trouble," Peter Platter was explaining when they reached the door leading to the studio. Speakers were everywhere in the building so no one would have to miss a single note that was played or a word the disc jockey uttered. Joy looked at a coffee-vending machine across the hallway, giggled and pointed.

"What is it?" Courage asked.

"Look what it sells besides coffee," the girl said.

Besides the usual outlet for the beverage was another, smaller slot labeled "Cotton, Sized to Fit Every Ear."

The others chuckled, then they all turned toward the door leading to the studio, eyes on the red "On Air" light over it.

"...and now back to some sensational sounds," the deejay announced. "Lay an ear against this sure-fire freak-out (hit) - The Wart Hogs, with I Can't Stand the Sight of You!"

As the music began to crash over the speaker, the red light winked off and Courage led the way through the door. Peter Platter looked up from behind round shades so huge they covered most of his face. A droopy walrus mustache and hair hid the rest, so if there was any expression on his face there was no way to tell. But he raised a hand in greeting and the tip of his nose moved, so the chances are he was smiling.

"Hey, the Bugaloos! Greetings, Bugs. When ya gonna cut another disc for me?"

"Never mind that," I.Q. said. "What was that awful sound you were broadcasting a few minutes ago?"

The deejay's shoulders rose in an exaggerated shrug. "It's outside my head, cats."

Joy looked puzzled. "What's he talking about?" she asked Harmony.

"He means he doesn't know," he replied. "I think."

Courage glanced toward the control room, where the engineer sat with his feet up on the console. "How about him? Does he know anything about it?"

"Oh, him?" the disc jockey said. "He didn't lay an ear on nuthin."

"He didn't hear anything?" Harmony demanded.

"Didn't you hear him say the engineer was deaf?" I.Q. asked.

"You mean he was serious?"

Peter Platter nodded. "You better believe it, kids. So, between the both of us we don't know no more than you do. You got any ideas, lay 'em on me."

"It doesn't seem to bother you," Courage said.

This time it was almost certain that the disc jockey was grinning. "If you were tuned in, cats, you know what you were lucky enough to miss. Benita..." He shuddered.

"I heard that!" The witch crashed through the door, making the whole studio shake, and stalked over to the deejay. "What's the idea of ruining my beautiful song that way?!"

Peter Platter sagged in his chair, a hand up in defense. "Wasn't me, Benita baby."

"Oh yeah? Then who was it?" She glared around at the Bugaloos. Then a thought struck her and her eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute!" She pointed an accusing finger. "You insects. You were there in my jukebox penthouse. You and your lies about something I've done. Me, who wouldn't harm an antenna on your heads! It was just a trick to get into my place and mess my gorgeous music. Funky! The Zapper!"

The rat squealed with delight as he started to aim the cumbersome weapon.

"Hold on now!" Courage commanded, and even the rat hesitated. "Peter Platter heard it, too, that awful sound."

"That's right," the deejay agreed. "We been gettin' phone calls from all over; everybody heard it."

"Sure," the witch sneered. "Those bugs'll do anything to louse me up. They're jealous of my...of my creative genius." She tossed her head and aimed her pointy nose at the ceiling. The she glowered at the Bugaloos. "Look at 'em! How can you trust anybody with wings?"

Harmony took an angry step toward the witch, but before he could speak Peter Platter raised a hand for silence.

"Cool it, cats," he commanded. "Time for some words from everybody's favorite deejay." He leaned toward his microphone and began his rapid-fire spiel while the others watched in obedient silence. Not even Benita would have dared defy the disc jockey's command to be still while his own words poured out over the air.

When he had finished and another number was pounding out, Peter Platter turned back to the others and stood up. He was a squat man with enormous shoulders and chest and short, bowed legs. "Now look, you cats, let's cut out all the jivin'. Ain't no sense in runnin' the mouth unless ya got somethin' to say. Now," he went on, turning to the Bugaloos. "What do you know about this static that's jammin' my jive?"

Courage explained briefly the occurrences of that morning in Tranquility Forest. "So, when we heard the same thing over the air, we naturally thought you'd know something about it."

"Knocked a tree down, huh?" Peter Platter chuckled. "That's some cool trick, baby."

"And me too," Joy pointed out ruefully.

"Yeah, yeah, I dig. Only I don't dig what did it. You got no ideas, Benita baby?"

The witch didn't respond at once; her eyes were thoughtful as she contemplated what she'd just heard. "Knocked a Bugaloo right out of the air, huh?" she mused. "Zowie! Would I like to get my hands on that gimmick!"

"I'll bet you would," Harmony commented sourly.

Benita regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Don't get me wrong, sweetie-pie. I wouldn't think of using anything like that on you darling creatures. You know me. I'm just a...a collector. Yeah, that's it. A collector."

"Uh-huh," Harmony said, clearly unconvinced.

"Now what's that wooden-eared engineer got on?" Peter Platter exploded. The tune that had been playing suddenly stopped, and in its place a low, musical humming began to float from the speakers. The deejay looked at the turntable beside his desk, but the record was still spinning, the needle in its groove, and according to all the dials and switches its music should have been going out over the air. But it wasn't.

"What is it?" Joy asked.

No one replied as they all listened. The humming had increased gradually in volume, soaring up and down the scale with a sort of vibrating choral effect.

"It...it sounds like a million cello strings playing all at once," Courage remarked, his head cocked to one side.

"No, it's more like feedback over a sound system -only it sounds sort of nice," Harmony said.

"It is nice," Joy agreed. She smiled, and then for no reason at all she shivered.

"It's like nothing any of us have heard before. Let's face it," I.Q. insisted.

The humming sound continued to swell until the studio itself seemed to tremble. Then another, deeper tone came in, heavy as the boom of a bass drum but steady and sustained. And then, as suddenly as it had all begun, it stopped. The thump and twang of a hillbilly rock tune resumed as though it hadn't been interrupted.

"Wow!" Courage exclaimed.

"It does sort of get to you," I.Q. remarked.

"What weirdo tripe!" Benita snorted.

"I'm feeling faint," Funky murmured weakly.

"Man, that's some spaced-out sound," Peter Platter said, lowering himself slowly back into his swivel chair.

The Bugaloos looked at each other. "You think maybe that's it?" Harmony suggested.

"People from space?" I.Q. asked.

Harmony nodded and glanced over at the disc jockey, who was sitting motionless, his giant shades aimed in their general direction.

"Are there really such things?" Joy said.

Harmony nodded toward Benita. "If she's possible, anything is."

"You know...that last sound. The deep, booming one?" I.Q. looked to see if the others understood what he was talking about. "That sounded an awful lot like what we heard just before the tree fell, didn't it?"

"Hey, that's right!" Harmony agreed. "Not as strong, but like they were playing the same note, only with a heavy foot on the soft petal."

While the Bugaloos were talking, Benita slipped over to stand behind Peter Platter's chair and bend over him. "Listen, lovey," she whispered ingratiatingly, "let's you and me check this thing out together."

"I don't dig you, baby."

"I mean, if we can find whatever makes those wacked-out sound, we might have something pretty groovy on our hands. You know, anything that can cut in on a broadcast like that has to be pretty special." She nudged the deejay with an elbow. "Dig?"

Peter Platter swiveled away from the witch and shook his head. "You find it, you let me know, but I ain't movin' outa this studio."

Benita regarded him with a shrewd look. "It just might cut in again, you know. Lots of times. Ruin your show?"

He looked up at her. "Uh-huh?"

"So-o-o, if I find it and put it out of action, maybe you'll be real grateful. Maybe you'll be willing to do Benita a tiny favor. Just a little one?"

Peter Platter sighed wearily. He knew what was coming. "Okay. Send me your next tape and I'll play it. If you find a way to stop that interference."

"And the one that you played today, only nobody could hear it?"

The deejay hesitated, then nodded.

The witch straightened and clapped her hands. "Goodie! I'm gonna be a rock star. At last, I'm a star!" In her exuberance, she danced over to the Bugaloos and would have kissed them if they hadn't hastily backed away. "I'm gonna be the biggest thing that ever hit this crum...this marvelous station. Peter Platter's gonna play one of my new hits every day! Maybe a coupla times a day!" She stopped suddenly and glared over at the disc jockey. "As a matter of fact, whaddya need with any other artists, anyway, when ya got the one and only Benita Bizarre to thrill all your million of listeners?"

For once Peter Platter was so appalled that he was struck speechless.

CHAPTER 5

Sparky Firefly was strolling beside the stream that ran along the edge of the Bugaloos' clearing, trying his best not to notice how long the afternoon shadows were getting. Soon it would be dusk, and he was all alone. Sparky didn't like being alone, not even in broad daylight. But in the dark...

He shuddered and blinked his tail light several times, just to make sure it was still in working order. It flashed reassuringly and he heaved a tiny sigh of relief. So far, so good. He glanced nervously up at the sun shining high above the tree tops. It was so bright up there, compared to down where Sparky was. At least, that was the way he felt at the moment. The Bugaloos' clearing was usually a cheerful place, but right now it felt almost depressing.

Sparky passed the place where the palm had fallen that morning and stooped to pick up a small frond the boys had missed when they carried the tree off into the woods that morning. Careless of them, he reflected – but after all, they *had* been in a hurry. He wondered what was happening to them. That was a mistake.

"Suppose," he murmured, stopping dead in his tracks, "that awful witch has done something terrible to them. Suppose she has them in her power. In chains! In a dungeon! With horrible monsters, and goblins and ...YI-I-I!!!

The little firefly jumped seven feet in the air, his wings beating frantically under his jacket, and he tumbled back to the ground in a heap. The sound that had startled him – a deep resonant BONG – changed to a tinkling that was more familiar. He looked resentfully over at the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower.

"How many times have I asked you not to do that?" He protested. "You know I have delicate nerves."

"Message coming through," the clustered grapes chorused. "Message coming through for Sparky."

The firefly got to his feet and scuttled over to the useful but mischievous plant. "What is it?" he asked fearfully. He didn't like getting messages. They might contain bad news.

"Car coming," said one grape.

"Coming fast," said another.

"But not too fast," chimed in a third.

"Who? Who is it?" Sparky demanded, jumping up and down in his anxiety.

"Coming from Rock City."

"Yes, from Rock City, definitely."

"And it's a car." The grapes were all grinning at Sparky.

"Tell me! Tell me!" he pleaded.

"It's..." the grapes sang in a chorus.

"BONG BONG," went the Bluebell Flower.

"...the Bugaloos!"

But by then the announcement was unnecessary, because at that moment the Bugaloo Buggy wheeled into the clearing and braked smoothly to a halt.

Sparky ran to it. "Oh boy, am I glad to see you!" he cried. "I was all set to come to your rescue!" He danced around Joy and the boys as they alit from the car, patting each one on the arm or a back as if to be certain they weren't some kind of illusion.

"Our rescue? Whatever for?" I.Q. asked.

"Yes, *we* were worried about you," Joy declared, bending down to give the firefly a reassuring hug.

"Well...you were gone so *long*," Sparky explained, somewhat abashed.

"We got back as quick as we could," Harmony said. He made straight for the organ and sat down at the keyboard. "Every time I get near that Benita I'm afraid she's going to drive me tone-deaf." He played a chord, a

little apprehensively, then beamed as the notes rolled out strong and together. "Now that's what I call heavy and light."

Sparky hopped over excitedly. "I know what that means. 'A bit of all right,' right?"

Harmony grinned and shook his head. "Outasight, man, outasight." He began to play, his fingers meandering over the keys until they found a theme. Within moments the others had picked up their instruments and were softly following his lead. After a few bars Joy began to sing. The Bugaloos were so attuned to each other that they never had any trouble making up appropriate lyrics on the spot.

"Listen to 'em," Benita Bizarre snarled, her ear glued to her Sound Radar machine. She was back in her Jukebox Penthouse, furiously concocting schemes to find the source of the strange music and to thwart the Bugaloos at the same time. "Why aren't they out looking for the thing-a-ma-jib, the whatever-it-is, instead of making that disgusting music?"

She turned around suddenly, and when she saw Woofer and Tweeter grooving quietly to the soft rock ballad coming through the radar speaker she snapped off the machine.

"That's enough of that, you cathode creeps!" she shrieked, and in her blind anger she punched the Reject Button beside her elbow. A trapdoor opened under their feet and the pair dropped, screeching, into the basement. "Let 'em stay there till they learn to appreciate *good* music," Benita muttered. "Funky! Where are you, you rat?"

"Right beside you, mein leader," Funky gulped.

The witch whirled on him and pointed to the radar. "I want you to stay beside that thing until you hear what those insects plan to do. Only don't you dare turn the sound up any more than you have to. I can't stand their blasted yowling."

Flinging her boa around her, the witch strode over to the radio and switched it on, then sat listening to the inanities of the disc jockey. "If I can only hear that sound again," she mused. "My keen intellect'll figure it out in a second..."

It was nearly dark when the Bugaloos finished their impromptu session and began thinking of dinner. One by one they drifted away from the bandstand to go about their evening chores, but Sparky didn't notice their departure. He was dancing, eyes closed, still hearing the gentle music in his head. He sometimes declared to himself that even if the Bugaloos hadn't been the sweetest, most decent kids he'd ever run across, he'd stay with them anyway just because of the music. At times he had pangs of regret that he didn't have their musical talent. Oh, it was there inside him all right, he told himself, but he was just too considerate to complicate their...uh-h...harmony. He chuckled at what wasn't even a *bad* pun, and at the same time realized that the music had stopped and the others had gone.

But now he didn't mind being all alone because he knew his friends, the Bugaloos, were all around him. He looked up and saw I.Q. bringing down the special light-absorbing Fluorescent Flashlights he had developed to illuminate the clearing at night. Since no fires were ever allowed in Tranquility Forest, the genius of the Bugaloos had worked out a system that used a special light-absorbing mineral which was found nearby. Placed in the treetops during the day, it absorbed sunlight, and at night it gave out a soft but more than adequate glow that was all the illumination they ever needed.

As the firefly watched I.Q. setting the glowing cones of rock in their brackets around the clearing, he thought he heard a faint rustling behind him, near the organ. A bird, he decided, or possibly a curious rabbit. They often came around, attracted by the music. Sparky smiled benignly. Nice little creatures, so soft and furry.

But now there was another sound coming from beside the organ. A funny, rasping sound, as if something were gnawing on a piece of bark. Or wood. Suddenly Sparky frowned and walked toward the organ. "Now stop it, you naughty rabbit," he scolded. "You know you're not supposed to do that." Probably a young one, he reflected. They didn't know any better and they had to be taught.

The gnawing sound stopped as he reached the organ. Behind the instrument it was dark, and he could see nothing, but that could be fixed easily enough. Turning to one side, he aimed his tail bulb toward the sound and flashed it on.

What he saw was no rabbit.

Courage was the first to reach the firefly in response to the cry of terror that echoed through the clearing. "What it is? What happened?" he demanded as Sparky clung for dear life to his legs.

"It...it...it..." Sparky could do nothing but blubber and point a shaking finger toward the organ.

"Come on, Sparky, what is it now?" I.Q. asked impatiently.

"A...a THING!" he wailed, trembling violently.

"What kind of thing? Harmony asked.

"A monster! An ugly, horrible monster!"

"Oh, come on," Courage said, "Where did you see it?"

"Behind the...the organ." He glanced over his shoulder toward the now-menacing shadows and quickly turned away again.

Harmony stepped over to his precious instrument with a worried look on his face. "I don't see anything..."

"Oh, there's nothing there," I.Q. asserted – with what was shockingly close to a sneer. "The little scaredly-fly is always seeing thing." He started to walk away in disgust, but Joy, arriving late on the scene, put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Why, I.Q.! I've never heard you talk that way..." Her voice trailed off as she looked up into his face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed softly. "But I have, haven't I. Just this morning."

"Well you can worry about Sparky's spooks, or whatever he's seeing now, but I've got things to do," I.Q. snapped, jerking away from Joy. The others watched with puzzled expressions as he ambled across the clearing.

"Now what's with him?" Courage inquired, not expecting an answer.

"Hey, mates!" Harmony shouted. "Come have a look at this!" He was pointing to something near the base of the organ.

Joy and Courage went to him, but Sparky hung back until he decided that it was better to stay with his friends than to be alone a whole two or three feet away from them.

"What is it?" Joy asked.

"Some blighter's been trying to chew up my instrument, that's what. Look there."

At first all they could see were some whitish grains behind the base of the organ, but a closer scrutiny revealed that it was sizeable pile of sawdust and wood shavings.

"And that's where it came from, too," Harmony pointed out, touching a spot on the back of the organ. Now they could all see clearly the place where the wood had been damaged. "Looks like someone's been at it with a file, doesn't it?"

"Or...teeth," Courage amended after a close examination.

"That's it! That's it!" Sparky cried. "That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

"Probably a rabbit," Joy suggested.

Harmony nodded. "Mischievous blighters, they are."

"But, but..." Sparky sputtered.

"The little ones are so cute," Joy was saying. "But they have to be taught not to destroy property."

"BUT IT WASN'T A RABBIT"

Sparky yelled so loud that the Bluebell Flower bonged gently in sympathetic vibration.

"Now come on, Sparky..." Courage began.

"I'm telling you," the firefly declared, his exasperation overcoming his fear for the moment. "It was a monster...well...not so big a monster as all that, but a monster. Definitely a monster."

"What kind of monster?" Harmony asked with a smile, humoring him.

"It was a...well...like this." Sparky stood on tiptoe and held a hand as high as he could reach. Then he lowered it, slowly and jerkily, until it was at the level where his waist would have been if he'd had one. About knee-high to a Bugaloo. "I said it wasn't so big," he said in a small voice. "But it *was* horrible," he insisted.

"All right, Sparky, tell us what it looked like," Courage said.

"Well, it was sort of grey. Or maybe green. And it had a round, pointed head with big, bulging eyes." The firefly bugged his eyes out and his tail light blinked rapidly. "And a great big mouth with all those terrible rows of teeth, and he growled and made a grab for me and..." Once more he clung to Courage's legs as he relived that terrifying encounter of moments ago.

"Now now, Sparky," the Bugaloo soothed, patting the firefly's mop of orange hair. "Perhaps it wasn't quite so bad as all that."

"Oh, it was worse. Much worse!"

As they spoke, Harmony was distracted by a faint rustle in the underbrush close by. He stepped toward the sound and saw a broad leaf tremble, then sway violently as he approached. He thought he saw something skitter away into the deeper darkness, but it didn't move like any of the creatures he was familiar with in Tranquility Forest.

"Hey mates!" he called in a tense voice.

"What is it?" Courage replied, looking toward him.

"There's something here..."

"The villainous bunny that vandalized your organ?"

"I...I'm not sure..." Harmony was walking cautiously but rapidly in the direction of the movement he had glimpsed.

"Where are you going?" Joy called.

"Just over here..." Suddenly Harmony leaped forward and flung himself to the ground. There was a thrashing in the undergrowth, and once he distinctly cried, "Ouch." The others ran to him – this time Sparky stayed firmly where he was – and found Harmony under a large-leaved shrub. He was grunting with effort, his body moving in spasmodic jerks.

"Are you all right?" Joy cried, bending over him.

"I'm fine," Harmony grunted. "But somebody help me hold this suffering blighter."

It was then that they saw the thing he was struggling to hold down, and even in the faint light it was clear Sparky hadn't been exaggerating about his "monster" one little bit.

CHAPTER SIX

It was only when they had carried their captive back to the clearing that the Bugaloos got a really good look at it, and Joy couldn't repress an expression of disgust.

"Oh, he is awful looking, isn't he?" she said. "The poor thing," she added hastily, because she couldn't help feeling sorry for the creature no matter how repulsive it was. And repulsive it was.

The head was much as Sparky had described it, like that of a frog or a toad, with an extended snout that vaguely resembled an alligator's - and teeth to match. Its thick, grey-green body was shaped like a barrel and covered with what looked like spiny scales but were revoltingly soft to the touch. Its only appendages were a pair of squat legs - it had no arms - and it was Joy who first noticed that one of its long, delicately webbed feet was bleeding.

"Oh dear, he's hurt," she cried, stooping to get a closer look. The creature struggled convulsively, but the fight was gone from it. Its chest throbbed rapidly, as though lungs and heart were about to burst from exertion.

"And so he should be," Harmony grumbled, examining a small cut on his forearm. "Nipped me, he did."

"Well, do you blame him?" Joy scolded. "He must be frightened to death."

"What I want to know is what is he? Or it?" Courage had a grip on the back of the creature's neck - or where its neck would have been if it had had one.

"Beats me," Harmony said. The cut wasn't serious, but their captive looked positively poisonous.

"Look, there's a thorn in its foot," Joy pointed out.

"A thorn?" Courage echoed. "There are no thorns in Tranquility Forest."

"Well, there it is," the girl insisted, and so it was, deeply imbedded in the bottom of the creature's foot.

"Now how did he get that?" Courage wondered.

"And how did an orchid curl up and die this morning?" Joy asked.

"And how did a tree fall down all by itself?" Harmony chimed in.

They all looked at the revolting thing with new curiosity. Its breathing was slowing to normal, and as they watched, its broad, fat throat began to distend and swell like a wad of bubblegum.

"Look at that!" Harmony cried.

"Look out," Courage warned, holding the creature further away from himself.

The bubble of bulging flesh heaved in and out for a moment, then began to vibrate slowly. A low sound issued from its mouth, faintly at first, then growing in intensity. It began to pulsate, varying the tones. It wasn't music, it wasn't words, it wasn't anything the Bugaloos had ever heard before. After a moment it stopped, and the creature shifted its protruding eyes from one to the other.

"It's almost as though...he said something," Joy gasped.

"And he's waiting for our answer," Courage said.

"What've you got there?"

The others looked up to see I.Q. sauntering toward them.

"Come and have a look," Harmony said. "Maybe you can tell us."

But I.Q. was as puzzled as they were, and after giving the creature a quick scrutiny he threw up his hands in surrender. "I don't know what it is," he stated, "but I know it doesn't belong in Tranquility Forest."

"Where could it have come from, then?" Courage asked.

I.Q. shrugged and glanced significantly in the direction of Rock City. "Where do all the ugly things come from?"

Courage frowned, then shook his head. "Maybe you're right, but this doesn't look like any of Benita's work."

"Okay. It was just a suggestion."

Once again their captive distended its throat and began its odd wailing. This time the pulsations continued for a long time and, as the Bugaloos listened, Harmony suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Hey! I think I've got it."

The others looked at him questioningly.

Harmony pointed at the creature. "That sound. Put maybe a hundred of him together and you've got something like what we heard at Peter Platter's studio today. You dig it?" He grinned.

"A member of the chorus, is that it?" I.Q. suggested.

"Sure," Harmony said with an air of triumph. Then his face fell. "Only...so what?"

"What do you mean?" Courage asked.

"So where do we go from here?"

"Right now we get this thorn out," Joy declared. "The poor thing is obviously suffering." Over the half-hearted objections of the boys, the girl knelt and reached slowly toward the foot of their captive. It tried to jerk away, but Courage held it firmly. With great patience and tenderness, Joy finally managed to put a hand on the foot and hold it gently. It felt cold and clammy, but she swallowed her revulsion until the creature seemed to accept her touch. Then she pinched the protruding end of the thorn between her fingernails and drew it out quickly.

"Let me see that," I.Q. requested. The girl handed the thorn to him and began to clean the wound with a clump of clean, damp moss.

"How did a thorn ever get here?" Courage asked.

"It's not a thorn," I.Q. replied.

"But what else...?"

"See for yourself." He handed the object to Courage.

"Why it's..." Courage pried at the green, pointed object. It unrolled, gradually, until he could see exactly what it was. "It's a leaf. Just a leaf."

"A bit small," I.Q. added.

"And rather nasty," Courage said. When he released it, it immediately snapped back into a tight roll with one end so compressed that it formed a needle-sharp point. "Now what do you suppose makes it do that?"

Nobody answered. They were thinking about orchids and palm trees and strange noises and Joy falling. Almost in unison, Harmony, Joy, and Courage looked at I.Q. Yes, and I.Q. too. That was another thing to think about.

"What are they saying? What are they saying?" Benita shoved Funky's head away from the Sound Radar receiver to listen. "Why don't ya turn this thing up so I can hear?"

"But mein vitchy, you said..."

"Never mind what I say. Shut up. I'm trying to listen!" She kept her ear glued to the speaker for a minute or two, then turned away in disgust. "It doesn't make any sense. You!" She wheeled on the rat. "Make some sense outa that idiot mumbo-jumbo."

Funky obediently listened, then shrugged and threw his hands up. "Dey're talking about...thorns? Vass iss das - thorns?"

"Das thorns iss vat I...ah-h, never mind!" The witch turned up the volume of the receiver. "Turn on the tape recorder. If they're onto something, I don't want to miss a word of it. Move!" She gave the rat a kick to emphasize the command, then leaned back to listen intently. For a few moments she didn't move, but suddenly she nearly leaped from her chair.

"Vat's wrong?" Funky inquired anxiously. He devoutly hoped that nothing else would happen to stir up the witch's anger. It had been a particularly trying day for him.

But Benita was smiling gleefully. "Don't interrupt," she said automatically. "Make sure you get all this. Those creepy little bugs are onto something."

"I tell you, there's a pattern to it," I.Q. insisted.

"You mean you can understand what it's saying?" Courage asked skeptically.

"No, of course not. But listen to this."

By now the revolting captive of the Bugaloos had repeated its strange pattern of sounds a number of times, and I.Q. had begun taping them. Now he played back the latest outburst while they all listened. Harmony was the first to nod and agree.

"I see what you mean," he said slowly.

"It's rather...pretty, isn't it?" Joy remarked. For lack of anything resembling a cage or a rope to tie it with, the Bugaloos were seated in a loose circle around the creature. It seemed docile enough, but it wasn't any nicer to look at.

"I'd hardly call the sound pretty," I.Q. said. "But at least he's easier on the ears than on the eyes."

"Hush!" Harmony hushed them. He was listening intently to the recording, nodding his head to the intricate but discernible pattern of the rhythm. Suddenly he scrambled to his feet and trotted over to the organ. After a few tries he managed a crude but recognizable imitation of the creature's sound.

At once their captive began to respond, apparently excited.

"Look!" Courage cried. "He is trying to say something!"

"Not trying," I.Q. said. "He is saying something, but we don't understand him."

"I think maybe we can," Harmony asserted.

"How do you mean?"

"I'm not sure yet." Harmony shook his head as he produced a wailing chord. "Somehow we have to figure out the pattern."

"Boys?" Joy spoke up from the circle. "Why don't we just...let him go?"

Harmony shook his head firmly. "No way, luv. For one thing, the blighter was trying to ruin my instrument. Besides, I've got a feeling it may be important for us to know what it's trying to tell us. Let's hear that last passage again, I.Q."

For hours the Bugaloos worked with the creature's sounds. Before long it seemed to get the idea, and willingly repeated its own wailing tones note for note as Harmony strove to reproduce them on the organ. But when he had succeeded in that - as closely as possible - he seemed to be no closer than before to unraveling the creature's language.

"Now what do we do?" Joy asked.

"I wish you people would stop all that yakkity-yak," came a voice from across the clearing. The Bugaloos looked over to see the Bluebell Flower bonging irritably, as though its sleep had been disturbed - which it undoubtedly had.

"Sorry about that," Courage apologized. "But this is rather important, you know."

"I suppose so," the plant agreed grudgingly. "Why don't you just ask Gort whatever it is that you want to know and be done with it."

"Who?"

"Gort. That vile thing you have there."

"How do you know it's...his name?" Courage asked in amazement.

"He told me. Or at least he told you. You just didn't understand."

"And you do?"

"Naturally."

"But...how?"

"I'm a bell, don't forget. And bells - finely made bells, at any rate - are sympathetic to most vibrations."

Courage looked in bewilderment at the others. Now it was I.Q. who snapped his fingers in sudden realization.

"Of course," he said. "The noise this thing...Gort...makes is simply a series of powerful vibrations..."

"So is every noise," Harmony interrupted, rolling out a low note for emphasis.

"I know, I know," I.Q. went on. "And Bluebell Flower understands what those vibrations mean because she's especially sensitive to them. Is that right?"

"In a way," the Bluebell Flower said grudgingly. "I haven't been paying that much attention."

"Well try it now, will you?" I.Q. requested. He started to reverse the tape recorder, but before he could the creature began to make its wailing, pulsating sound, looking straight at the Bluebell Flower.

"My name...is...Gort," the plant translated slowly. "You...must...let me go."

The creature began to move around agitatedly in its confined circle, but it made no attempt to escape.

"Ask it...him...what he's doing here," I.Q. said. The Bugaloos listened while the Bluebell Flower bonged in an odd fashion they had never heard before. Then Gort apparently replied. "He says he's one of many hundreds like him," the Bluebell Flower reported. "I think the word he used was swarms," the plant added with an expression of acute distaste.

"Hundreds?" Courage asked with disbelief.

"I'm just repeating what he said. Don't blame me."

"But...where are they? What are they doing here?"

"I'll try again. Gort seems more intent on boasting than in answering our questions." Once more the Bluebell Flower bonged and listened to the response.

"Oh my," the plant choked. "Oh my, oh my! What can we do?"

"Do? About what?" I.Q. demanded.

"He says...he says they're going to take over all of Tranquility Forest."

"How do they think they're going to do that?" Harmony wanted to know.

"Gort won't say - but he seems terribly sure of himself. See him smiling?"

The truth of it was that it wasn't possible to see any expression on the creature's face other than a decidedly evil leer, but the Bugaloos were willing to take the word of the Bluebell Flower.

"But where are these...swarms?" Courage asked.

"All he says is that they're in Tranquility Forest now."

"How did they get here?"

"He just says they came from far away - wherever that might be."

"Ask him if he and his crowd have anything to do with the bad things that have been happening around here," Harmony suggested.

"Oh, he's already told me about that. But I don't really understand it."

"How do you mean?"

"Something about...well, he seems to be calling it the 'Sigmund Apparatus.' Does that make sense?"

The Bugaloos all looked at each other and shook their heads. "Beats me," Harmony admitted to the Bluebell Flower. "What does he say about it?"

"He says it was damaged during the journey...What's a journey, by the way?" the Bluebell Flower interrupted itself, because it had never been anywhere - which was hardly surprising in a plant. I.Q. explained as best he could and urged the flower to get on with it.

"Well, Gort said the...Sigmund Apparatus...was damaged...Oh. I said that. At any rate, they're fixing it, and the tests they've been making are probably causing some trouble here and there. Gort seems terribly happy about that."

"I'll bet he is," Harmony snorted.

"You mean this thing, whatever it is, can make trees fall? Break in on Peter Platter's broadcast?" Courage asked.

"And make me fall? Destroy an orchid?" Joy added.

The Bluebell Flower bonged for a moment and listened to the reply. "Gort says...uh-h...I can quote exactly..."

"Then do it, mate," Harmony said impatiently.

There was a moment's silence, punctuated by a low moan from the edge of the clearing. Ever since they had caught the loathsome creature, Sparky had been hiding under his palm-leaf hammock. But he could hear every word that was being spoken in the clearing no matter how hard he tried not to listen.

"Poor Sparky," Joy murmured.

"Poor us," I.Q. said. "Tell us, Bluebell, exactly how does this...apparatus...do the things it does?"

"Oh, I don't understand such things. It's something about vibrations."

Courage laughed shortly. "Bad Vibrations, I'd say."

"That's what it's been around here all day," Harmony agreed. "Swindles and Bribes."

"What's that?"

"Vibes, mates. Vile Vibes." Harmony looked at Gort. "That's what he is, all right. A Vile Vibe."

"And there are...swarms of them," Joy said, her voice shaking slightly.

"Don't say that," the Bluebell Flower protested.

"Sorry," the girl apologized.

"Well, we'd better find out more..." I.Q. began, but he was interrupted by a high-pitched humming from the throat of Gort.

"Now what's he saying?" Courage wanted to know.

"He says," the Bluebell Flower replied, "thank...the pink...female...for removing the...well, he calls it a 'leafspear'...and now his wound...has healed...and he can leave..."

"That's what he thinks," Harmony said, slipping off the organ stool and advancing on the creature. But before he could take two steps, Gort suddenly stood erect on his squatty legs, flexed them, and leaped completely over

the heads of the Bugaloos. He came down at the far edge of the clearing, took another bound, and disappeared into the dark forest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Hah! That'll teach that Bugaloo brat to be so stupid nice." Benita Bizarre snapped off the speaker of her Sound Radar and drummed her fingers on the table in front of her.

"Dot's some great rotten Gort, huh Boss?" Funky gloated.

"Yeah," she agreed absently. "Only I don't like him."

"But he's der finest! Und think of it: Dere are swarms of him!"

"Uh-huh," the witch responded. "Only, where are they?"

The rat flung his arms up helplessly in his usual don't-blame-me gesture. "How should I know?" he whined.

For once Benita didn't bother so much as to lift a threatening hand. She was lost in thought. "Bad Vibrations," she muttered. "Sigmund Apparatus. Boy, oh boy, oh boy, if I could get my hands on the Sigmund Apparatus." Suddenly she wheeled on Funky. "What the hoo-haw is a Sigmund Apparatus?"

The rat cringed, but before he could make some kind of innocuous reply the witch turned back to slump against the table, her head propped up by her hand.

"Sigmund Apparatus. It can do anything. Knock down trees, ground those insects - and cut in on Peter Platter's show any time I want to."

Funky couldn't see the witch's face, but he didn't have to. The tone of her voice told him she was grinning her most repulsive grin.

Suddenly Benita stood up and began striding back and forth around the room. She paused to contemplate the rack of giant records that filled one wall next to the huge turntable, and her low chuckle froze Funky's blood. He tried to ignore it - after all, it happened all the time - but he had a feeling in his bones that the witch was about to start something particularly unpleasant. It wasn't that Funky had any objection to unpleasant things. It was just that he was always given the hard part to do, and he was, when you get right down to it, more a connoisseur than a practitioner. At least, that's the way he thought of himself. If he ever expressed his true feelings to Benita he knew he'd get a clout on the schnozzola.

"Get rid of these things," the witch ordered, gesturing disdainfully at the records. "And make it snappy, because you're taking a little trip tonight."

"Vass iss das?" Funky asked.

"Just do like I tell you! Bring Woofer and Tweeter up from the dungeon to help you if you have to. You've gotta be there before sunup."

"Vere iss dot?"

"Der Forest, Dumkopf!" Benita snapped.

"Der Forest? Me?" Funky had a terrible allergy to plants and almost every other kind of living thing.

"Yah...yeah. What did ya think?"

"Uh-h..." The rat swallowed hard and made the effort to paste what he hoped was a smile on his face. "May I ask vot iss I am doink in der Forest?"

"You're keeping an eye on those insects, that's vot...what. Don't talk so much. You're giving me an accent."

Funky pointed helplessly toward the Sound Radar. "But...ve can listen..."

"Of course we can listen," the witch snapped. "But I want to see what those brats are doing. Dig?" She dug the rat with a vicious elbow and he staggered halfway across the room.

"Yah," Funky said in a subdued voice. "I am now der shpy."

"Yeah," Benita mused. "I hate to have to depend on you, but it's the best I can do. I wonder what's keeping the Looksee Radar Set."

"Der...Looksee Radar?"

"Sure. You remember. I ordered it from the catalogue." Benita rubbed her hands together. "Boy, oh boy, with that I'll not only be able to listen in on those insects, I'll be able to see what they're up to."

Funky remembered vaguely something about a new gadget that the witch had talked about. But that had been so long ago he had almost forgotten about it. Oh well, he shrugged, the mail is slow these days.

"Uh-h...gorgeous leader?" the rat ventured.

"Yeah? Why ain't ya tossing out those stupid discs?"

"I vass just vonderink. Ven I go to der Forest...vot am I suppose to be lookink for?"

"You just keep an eye on those Bugaloos. They're doing the looking-for."

"For vot?"

"For the Sigmund Apparatus, lame brain. Hey!" She pointed a finger at Funky. "Any relation?"

"Vass iss?"

"Relation! You know...Sigmund?"

Funky shrugged helplessly. "Nein. Dere vass a Felix who vass mein uncle on mein step-cousin's side, und Gretchen. She vass..."

"Never mind. Never mind," the witch interrupted. "Look, here's the way we'll work it. You sneak up on the Bugaloos' clearing and watch every move they make. Whenever you have anything to tell me, call me on the Crawlie Talkie. Got it?"

Funky nodded reluctantly. "Ven I have sumting to tell you," he repeated slowly.

"Yeah. Those insects have to find that Sigmund Apparatus; otherwise, they're goners. And when they do...POW! We move in."

"Mit der Zapper?" Funky asked eagerly.

"Naturally."

Funky drew himself erect, his allergies forgotten, and extended his arm stiffly toward the witch. "Yawohl, mein leader! To der Forest!" He turned and goose-stepped toward the door, but Benita grabbed him by the collar and stopped him short.

"Vass iss now?" the rat asked cravenly.

"Get rid of them junky old records. Remember? Benita's making a clean sweep!"

When dawn came to the clearing in Tranquility Forest, no one awoke - because no one had slept. All through the night the Bugaloos had talked about the frightening things they learned from Gort. Even Sparky had crept out from his hiding place to join the discussion, though his contribution had been largely confined to shudders and groans.

"I'm still not convinced it's not the work of that old hag in Rock City," Harmony declared.

"How could that be?" I.Q. objected. "If Benita had the power to do what the Vile Vibes have done, we'd have been done for long ago."

The others agreed with his viewpoint. "Bad vibrations," Joy said musingly, looking sharply at I.Q.

"What's that suppose to mean?" he said a trifle defensively.

"I was just thinking. You...well, several times in the past day and night you haven't exactly been yourself, you know."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Oh come on," Courage cajoled. "Admit it, I.Q. You've been sort of snappish lately, and that's not like you at all."

I.Q. was silent for a moment.

Harmony spoke up. "You think maybe that Sigmund Apparatus could louse up our moods too?"

Joy looked at him. "Bad vibrations," she repeated.

He nodded. "I dig. I think."

"Joy has a point," I.Q. said slowly. "If those creatures have some kind of machine that puts out destructive vibrations, it could very well affect our nerves, too."

Sparky looked around cautiously at the still-dark edges of the clearing. "I wonder where they are," he said in a shaky voice.

"We've got to do more than wonder, mates," Courage pointed out. "We've got to find the blighters before they get that apparatus of theirs in proper working order."

"Could they really take over all of Tranquility Forest?" Sparky whimpered.

"That's hard to say. But up till last night we didn't know the Vile Vibes even existed, so anything is possible."

"How shall we go about looking for them?" Joy asked.

There was no answer for a moment until Harmony spoke up. "We'll have to organize a search party. Between the four of us, we can cover a large area. From the air we should be able to spot those Ugliers easily, especially if there's hundreds of them."

I.Q. shook his head. "No."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Two things. One, the Vile Vibes won't be at all easy to spot from the air. They blend in with the colors of the Forest too well. And second...remember what happened to Joy yesterday."

"You think they'd do that again?" Courage asked.

"I'd bet on it."

"I still don't see how a...a vibrating machine can do all these things," Joy said.

"I'm not sure, either, but sound can do a lot of strange things."

"But there was no sound when I fell."

"There are a lot of sounds we can't hear, but they're there. No, my suggestion, mates, would be that we stay on the ground until we've located the Vile Vibes."

The others looked at I.Q., and they knew he was right.

Harmony yawned. "Well, if we're going to be earthbound, we may as well have a little music."

Courage grinned. "Maybe we can work out something smashing off Gort's music." He picked up the tape recorder and walked toward the bandstand.

"Not a bad idea," Harmony agreed. "At any rate, I'd like to be able to talk to the Vile Vibe without having that ding-dong" - he nodded toward the sleeping Bluebell Flower - "as an interpreter."

Joy skipped over to the bandstand as I.Q. brought up the rear. Courage turned on the tape, and they all listened for a moment before Harmony sounded a note on the organ. For a few minutes, they improvised off the weird wailings, but it was no good. I.Q. was the first to fling down his guitar with an expression of disgust.

"Let's face it, lads. We're just not with it this morning." He walked away without waiting for a reply. The others watched him go with mixed feelings of wonder and dismay.

"Oh, what's happening to us? Joy wailed.

"I'd say the Vibes are getting to I.Q.," Courage observed.

"He's always been a bit high strung at that," Harmony agreed.

"You know?" Courage said. "That must be it."

"What?" Joy asked.

"Look at it this way. Suppose this...Sigmund Apparatus is putting out vibrations all the time. Maybe not very powerful, but enough to affect little things. Like your orchid, Joy. Or I.Q.'s nerves."

"Why not ours then?" the girl said. "I don't feel any different. Do you? Do you, Harmony?"

"Perhaps not," Courage admitted. "But as I.Q. himself would tell you, we all react in different ways to the same thing, and I'd bet his nerves are being jangled by that machine, whatever it is."

"And wherever it is," Harmony added. He was still playing random chords against the background of the taped sounds of Gort. Suddenly he stiffened, staring at the keys pressed under his fingers. "Hey!" he shouted.

"What's wrong?" Courage came over to his side.

"Listen," Harmony said.

"I don't hear anything."

"That's it. Not a thing. But I'm playing a chord and nothing's coming out."

"So you are. Anything wrong with the organ?"

"No..."

"And nothing's coming out of the tape recorder either," Joy pointed out.

"Did we come to the end of the recording?" Courage wanted to know.

"I don't think so. We used up most of the reel and it's not more than halfway through yet."

In the eerie silence, the Bugaloos looked at each other and shivered. Not even the sound of a distant bird-cry could be heard.

"Oh oh oh oh!" Sparky moaned. "They're coming. The Vile Vibes are coming to get us, and they've made us deaf so we can't even hear them!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Now Sparky, don't be silly," Joy chided. "I can hear you perfectly well, and you can hear me. Can't you?"

The little firefly didn't answer right away because he had his hands firmly clasped over his ears. Harmony grinned and took his fingers from the keyboard to help Joy persuade Sparky to listen to reason - and instantly the clearing was flooded with the sound of Gort's weird wailing again.

"What happened?" Courage asked.

Harmony was bewildered. "I don't know. I just took my hands off the keys and...hey!" He leaped back to the keyboard and began playing experimental chords until he found the one he wanted. Suddenly, once again, there was silence.

"I don't understand," Joy said.

"Simple," Harmony grinned, taking his hands away again. Once more they could hear the tape recorder playing. "I just happened to hit a combination of notes that canceled out the Vile Vibe's notes. You know, I.Q. can give you the scientific explanation, but all I can tell you is that it has to do with the different wave lengths of sounds. Vibrations, got it? Sort of like opposites. When you play one note and its exact opposite at the same time you get..." He hit the chord again. "Silence."

"That's not exactly it," I.Q. said, returning to join the group, "but it's close enough."

Sparky still had his hands firmly over his ears, but as he saw the Bugaloos apparently conversing normally, he cautiously let his fingers spread a little. His eyes popped wide open and his tail bulb blinked furiously. "Hey! Hey, Bugaloos! I can hear! Everything's all right...or is it?"

Courage patted him on the head. "Well, not exactly, lad. But we're definitely not deaf, so we can be thankful for that. Now what say, mates. I say the sooner we start looking for these Vile Vibes the better."

"I'm with you," Harmony agreed, and so did the others.

"I'll go that way," I.Q. suggested, pointing South.

"And I'll go the other," Harmony said.

"Now hold on a minute," Courage objected. "We can't just go running off helter-skelter like that. We don't know what we're likely to run into when we do find the loathsome creatures, so I suggest we search in pairs. Harmony, you and I.Q. start looking in that direction and Joy and I'll head out this way. If either of us finds anything, we're to return directly here and wait for the others before we do anything else. Any objections?"

"One," Sparky said in a small voice.

"What's that?"

"What about me?"

"Well...you've got the most important job of all, Sparky. We can't very well go off and leave the camp unguarded, so it's up to you to do it."

Sparky clearly didn't like the idea at all. "But...I'd be very helpful at finding the...er-r...the things." He couldn't bring himself to pronounce the name of the Vile Vibes. "After all, I found...uh-h...the thing last night, didn't I? With my light?" He winked his bulb in what he hoped was a persuasive manner.

Courage shook his head and smiled gently. "You did a fine job last night, Sparky, but really you'll be most helpful right here."

"But suppose they...they come back. Swarms of them?" The firefly closed his eyes in horror at the very idea.

"That's not likely. If they were simply going to attack us, they'd have done it by now."

"That's right," I.Q. put in. "It's obvious they're waiting till their apparatus is in complete working order. So let's get cracking, eh? We've no idea how long we've got."

"Funky! Come in, Funky! Answer me, you rat!" Benita Bizarre was screaming into her Long Distance Crawlle Talkie and getting no response from her butler-chauffeur-control-room-engineer-spy. "If you don't speak up, I'll swap you for a piece of over-ripe cheese!"

There was still no answer. Beside her the Sound Radar was silent. The Bugaloos had left their clearing a few minutes earlier and all the witch had heard since then were a few chirping birds and an occasional sigh from Sparky.

Benita snapped the OFF/ON button on the Crawlle Talkie off and on several times, but it didn't do any good. Furious, she started to hurl it across the room but thought better of it. Instead, she tossed her half-eaten carton of prune yogurt against the empty record rack, where it splattered spectacularly.

"Clean that up!" she barked at Tweeter, who was hovering behind her, trying to keep out of sight. "I don't know why you can't keep this place neat any more. Besides, that stuff doesn't go with my color scheme." Benita turned back to the Crawlle Talkie to try to raise the rat once more.

The reason Funky wasn't replying to the witch's call was simple: He had lost his Crawlle Talkie. Long before the first pink glow of dawn had appeared in the sky, he had been spying from the edge of the Bugaloos' clearing. They were too far away for him to hear what they were saying, but that wasn't his concern. All he was supposed to do was keep an eye on them. Those had been his orders, and Funky always carried out his orders to the letter.

Well...almost always. He had only closed his eyes for a moment. Resting them. And the next thing he knew there were two of the Bugaloos walking straight toward his hiding place. Only half-awake, Funky had scurried back deeper into the Forest, forgetting the Crawlle Talkie in his haste. Now, as he cautiously made his way back to the clearing again, he couldn't find the place where he had left it.

"I know it vass sumvers around here," he muttered to himself, keeping a wary eye on the clearing. He could see Sparky over near the bandstand. The firefly had I.Q.'s guitar and was trying to pluck out something resembling a tune, but with little success.

Funky pushed a clump of underbrush aside and spotted the two-way radio at last. "Aha!" he cried - a little too loudly. He was well concealed from the clearing, but his cry was just barely heard by the firefly, who was understandably sensitive to odd noises at the moment.

"What was that?" he breathed. The sound wasn't repeated. "Probably a bird," Sparky answered himself. "A nice little bird, come to keep me company. Sure, it's a bird." He forced himself to walk toward the sound. "Please let it be a bird," he pleaded.

Funky didn't see the firefly's approach as the rat struggled to turn on the Crawlle Talkie. The ON/OFF button was stuck, and he had to jiggle it. Poke it. Punch it. Smack it against a tree trunk...and that did the trick. There was an ear-piercing screech of interference that made the rat jump back, momentarily out of concealment.

Sparky was halfway across the clearing when he heard the spine-chilling howl from the radio. At the same instant, he caught a glimpse of something moving over there among the trees - something ugly and grey. He didn't wait to take a second look, but turned on his heels and fled. "They're coming! They're coming!" he shrieked. "Swarms of them!"

Benita didn't hear the uproar in the clearing because she had already given up trying to reach Funky and was on her way to the Forest herself.

"Now listen to me, you brillo-brains," she was saying to Woofer and Tweeter at the door of the jukebox penthouse. "Nobody's to get in here after I leave, ya got that? Nobody at all. If you open the door to one single soul, I'll have you broken up and sold to a used-parts dealer."

"Sure, Boss," the flunkies chorused, both relieved to have such an easy assignment. "Nobody gets in after you're gone. Nobody."

"Okay," the witch grumbled, and swept through the door and down to her garage. For a moment she contemplated taking the Baroque Buggy, but decided it wasn't much good to go spying in. Besides, she couldn't drive. But Benita could ride a motorcycle - sort of - and there was her brand new Br-room-Br-room Bike waiting for her.

"Oh, goodie goodie," she exulted as she threw a leg over the saddle. "Look out Marlon, here I come!" The guardian peacock was so shocked at the sight of the witch's weaving, skidding, and roaring exit on the dazzling, chrome-laden orange-and-purple motorcycle that he forgot to lower his tail feathers for almost half an hour.

Benita tore through the streets of Rock City with the throttle wide open. Fortunately for her - and for the people of the city - no one got in her way, because she wasn't quite sure how to stop the motorcycle. But then, at the first hint that Benita was about to leave her Jukebox Penthouse, everyone in Rock City scattered for the witch shelters anyway. There was no sense in taking chances with Benita Bizarre.

By the time she reached the edge of Tranquility Forest, the witch had attained a measure of mastery over the snorting Bike, and she moved cautiously as she neared the Bugaloos' clearing. "Just wait till I get my hands on that rat," she muttered. "I'll smash him. I'll tie his nose in knots. I'll take away his PX privileges."

"Yi! She's going to run over me!" Funky squealed.

The witch was so engrossed in her plans for the rat that she hadn't seen him standing in the pathway. She was so startled by his cry, she automatically swerved to one side, crashing into a thick clump of bushes. She immediately became hopelessly entangled, her long boa and headdress twisting and entwining among the leaves and branches.

"Get me outta here!" she shrieked. "You dudderdome! Help me!"

After long minutes of pulling and pushing, the witch staggered out of the clump and fell on top of the rat. After some more thrashing and struggling, they both managed to fight clear of each other and wound up sitting in the path. Funky was the first to regain his feet, and he hurried to the witch's side to help her up.

"Get away!" Benita snarled, cuffing the rat aside. "The last thing I need from you is help!" She stood up awkwardly, adjusted her clothes as well as she could, and glowered at Funky. "Boy! Some spy you are!" She gestured toward the clearing just beyond a fringe of underbrush. "That firefly brat probably heard us by now. You and your...your...nose!" It was the only thing she could think of right then.

"Oh please, mein leader," Funky whined. "It vass an accident. Anyway, der firefly iss gone. I vass trying to varn you..."

"Varn me...warn me of what?"

"About der...der things dey call das Vile Vibes."

"I know all about 'em."

"But...but I mean...dey vass here. Dey...dey sneaked up on me and caught me by surprise. Svarms of dem!"

"What are you talking about?" the witch demanded.

Funky hesitated. He had worked out the elaborate lie when he finally managed to call the witch on the Crawlie Talkie and realized Benita must be on her way to the Forest herself. "I vass over dere, keeping an eye on der Bugaloos der vay you ordered me to, mein leader."

"Yeah, yeah," Benita said impatiently.

"Und...before I knew vot vass happenink, dey grabbed me. Dose vile creatures carried me off into der voods." He gestured vaguely. "Vay back dere. Somevere."

"Uh-huh," the witch said skeptically. "Okay, so then what?"

"Vell...dey kept me prisoner. Dey tortured me." The rat thumped himself on his scrawny chest. "But I didn't talk, mein leader. I vass steadfast to der Cause!"

"Cause schmoz. So how come you're back here now?"

"Oh. I got away. I waited for mein chance, und den I leaped on dem. Pow! Svat! Patoovie! I blitzed 'em!"

"Uh-h...yeah. Where was this place they took you?"

The rat shrugged. "No place special. Just...back dere." Again, he gestured vaguely.

"Well lead me to it, Funky boy," the witch ordered. "If you're as lucky as you say - and you better be, Funky boy, you better be - you may have stumbled on the headquarters of those so-called Vile Vibes. Did you see the machine?"

"Das...machine?" Funky said weakly. He was wishing he'd thought up a different lie, but now it was too late.

"The machine! The Sigmund Apparatus!"

"Oh, das apparatus. Uh-h...nein. I saw nuthink like dot."

"You always had lousy eyes, anyway," the witch snorted. "Too close together. Too beady. It must have been around there somewhere. So lead the way."

"But, but..."

"Get going, Funky. March!"

CHAPTER NINE

Sparky was lost. After running in blind panic until exhaustion forced him to stop, he looked around and realized he hadn't the faintest idea where he was. He thought he had taken off in the general direction taken by Joy and Courage - but then, he hadn't been thinking very clearly when he left the Bugaloos' clearing.

He knew it couldn't be much past the middle of the morning, but the towering trees blotted out most of the sunlight, and the shadows were deep along the floor of the Forest. Sparky tried to still his wildly beating heart so that he could hear if anyone was around. Or anything. He shivered, and only then did he realize he was still clutching I.Q.'s guitar.

"Oh golly, he won't like that," Sparky said aloud. "I'll be punished." Then he had a second thought. "I wouldn't mind any kind of punishment, though - if only there was someone here to punish me."

He began to move cautiously down the gloomy trail. In the distance a single bird chirped, then was silent. Not a breath of air stirred the leaves. Sparky came to a fork in the trail and paused to decide which way to go. Neither one looked promising.

"Joy?" the firefly croaked, his voice cracking. "Courage? Yoo-hoo." He wanted to yell as loud as he could, but at the same time he didn't want to make a sound - because they might hear him. He compromised with a loud whisper and, of course, no one replied. At last he made up his mind and started down the left-hand fork.

He hadn't gone far when the trail began to slope steeply downward, twisting and turning among outcroppings of grey rock. Sparky was beginning to regret his choice of route when he suddenly emerged in a tiny clearing. It wasn't much more than a wide spot in the trail, and high overhead the trees seemed to lean toward each other, interlacing their branches to keep the sun from penetrating. Sparky felt a chill, as though a cold wind were blowing across his spine. But there was no wind, not even the faintest breeze.

"Oh boy," he murmured. "I don't think this is anywhere I want to be. In fact, I'm sure of it." In this dank and dreary place, he could imagine hordes of Vile Vibes rushing at him from all directions, baring their fangs at him and making their unearthly music.

At one side of the clearing was a vast column of rock that soared almost as high as the tree tops. Sparky leaped for it. At least he'd have something solid against his back. "I'll go down fighting," he whispered fiercely. "I'll sell my life dearly. I'll...I'll give up if they'll let me," he finished with a whimper.

He leaned against the seamed face of the rock and put the guitar down near his feet. Nothing moved - nothing that he could see. The firefly took a deep breath and stooped over to pick up the guitar again - and this time the sudden chilly blast of air, he felt, wasn't his imagination. Startled, he lost his balance and began to fall backwards. He waited for the expected bruising contact with the face of the towering rock, but there was nothing there, nothing at all to stop his endless fall down into cold, dank darkness.

"Well, what about it? Is this the place or isn't it?" Benita stood over Funky, hands on her hips, and glared down at the cringing rat.

"I...I think so."

They were in the middle of a circle of date palms, a pleasant little grove where the sun shone brightly and cheerfully.

"Whaddya mean you think so?" Can't you tell?"

Funky shrugged. "Vell, you know, mein vitchie - ven you've seen one bunch of trees, you've seen dem all."

"Ah-h!" Benita rasped, giving the rat a routine cuff across the chops. "Come on. We'll keep going till we find the place where those things kept you prisoner." She started to stalk away, then stopped short and faced the rat. "That is, if they really did capture you."

"Oh yes, yes! I swear it!" Funky was miserable. Not because he had to lie, but because of the wild goose chase his lies were leading them on. As they trudged on through the Forest, he made a silent pledge to himself about lying in the future. He promised himself that from now on he would think up better lies than this one.

They came to the bank of a small stream, narrow but running deep and clear. Benita stopped and contemplated the sparkling water with supreme distaste. "Ugh!" she exclaimed.

Funky shared her feelings. "Ve'll have to turn back."

"Turn back nuthin'. Didn't you tell me this was the way you came last night when you were getting away from the Vibes?"

"Uh-h...vell, yah. I...I must haff chumped. See, it's not so wide."

"Okay. So jump it. If you can do it, so can I."

The rat wasn't the world's worst jumper, but he was right up there. Still, he knew all too well the consequences of not making an attempt. He backed down the trail, got his stumpy legs moving as fast as they would carry him, gave a mighty leap and closed his eyes, waiting for the icy splash.

"Umpf!" he exploded as he landed hard on the opposite bank. "I made it!" he cried in astonishment. "Uff course," he added hastily. He turned back to smile - if you could call it that - at the witch. "See? Iss easy."

"Okay, Funky. Here I come!" Benita backed off a few steps and began to run. But in her tight skirt and spike heels she was at a distinct disadvantage, and as she launched herself in the air it was obvious she wasn't going to make it. Her front foot just reached the far bank and she balanced precariously, flailing the air with her arms. Funky tried to help her, managing to get a grip on her hand, but she was too much for him and they both toppled into the stream.

Benita came up first, bubbling and spluttering. Mercifully, the words she was spewing at the rat came out as an inarticulate gargle. They both rolled and splashed in the swiftly moving stream, and before they could regain the bank they were swept around the bend.

Funky was intent in getting to shore and...well, the thought of running away was a great temptation. But he knew there was no way to escape from Benita Bizarre, not permanently. They were destined for each other. Sighing inwardly, the rat grabbed a protruding tree root and turned back to help the witch. She took his hand and crawled right over him, gouging the rat painfully with her heels. He didn't mind. That was nothing to what he was going to get for letting her fall. He started to pull himself out of the water after the witch - and was kicked right back.

"You lunkhead! You wretched rodent! You marble-headed mouse!"

"Yah, yah, yah," Funky squealed agreement as he floundered in the water. "I am sorry, mein leader. I tried to keep you from fallink into der vater..."

"That's not what I mean, you chicken-hearted cheese chewer. Look where we are. Look!"

Funky couldn't see a thing until he managed to drag himself up the steep bank - and when he saw he wanted to slip into the water again and drift away. They were right back at the Bugaloos' clearing.

"Do you think we should go back?" Joy asked. "It's nearly noon."

Courage looked up at what he could see of the sun, then shook his head. "We're heading in that general direction anyway," he said. "Let's go down this path, and then if we don't find any sign of the Vibes we'll return to the clearing."

"Maybe Harmony and I.Q. have found something," the girl said hopefully.

"Let's hope so. We've certainly had no luck."

They walked briskly down a path that seemed to twist and turn back on itself every few yards. After a few minutes, Courage stopped and scratched his head. "This doesn't seem to go any place."

"No, it doesn't," Joy agreed. "I've never been here before, have you?"

"It doesn't look familiar to me."

"Are you sure this is the way back to the clearing?"

"It should be. We made a big circle to the West and North when we started out, and now we're going South. It should bring us right back."

"Oh, I wasn't doubting you," Joy assured him.

"Well, let's keep going. The others may already be there. With news, I hope."

Joy and Courage continued along the strange path until it made a sharp turn around a huge rock and the girl stumbled and fell. Courage jumped to help her.

"I'm all right," she said with a smile. "I just tripped over something. It's so gloomy here it's hard to see...Courage!"

"What is it?"

"Look what I stumbled over." She was pointing to the ground.

"A guitar?" Courage said wonderingly. He knelt to pick it up. "Blimey! It is a guitar!"

"And it either belongs to I.Q. or it's an exact copy."

"Right you are, and it's I.Q.'s all right. No mistake about it."

"But...what could he have been doing here?"

"He couldn't have been. He and Harmony went to search in the opposite direction."

"Unless he flew."

"Not I.Q., not after that lecture he gave us. Anyway, he didn't take his guitar with him when he left. I'm sure of that."

"Then how..." Joy stopped.

"There's only one person who could have done it, and you know who," Courage declared.

"Yes, I suppose so. Sparky is always trying to play that guitar when I.Q. isn't around. But...if Sparky brought it here, where is he now?"

"Good question. SPARKY!" he shouted. There wasn't even an echo in response.

"He must have been frightened away from the clearing," Joy reasoned. "That's the only reason he'd have been in a dreary place like this."

"Or carried away," Courage suggested grimly.

"Oh, I hope not...what is it?"

Courage was eyeing the face of the towering rock with a calculating expression. "Maybe," he said slowly, "we've found what we're looking for."

The girl looked at the rock. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Suppose something scared Sparky and he ran into the Forest. He got lost. He always does, you know, if he's not with one of us."

"Yes," Joy agreed.

"Let's say he made his way here somehow. And here...they grabbed him!"

"Here?"

"It must have been. He wouldn't have dropped the guitar here otherwise."

"But where could he be now?"

Courage pointed at the rock. "I'll bet anything there's an entrance here somewhere. Look at all those folds and creases in that rock."

Joy looked where Courage indicated. "That must be it."

"Somewhere underground, I'll wager. That's where they're hiding out."

"What shall we do now?"

Courage hesitated a moment. "We've got to find the others. And fast."

"Of course. But suppose Sparky hasn't been captured or anything? Maybe he just panicked and he's wandering around alone near here."

"He'll just have to wander around a little longer, that's all."

"No," the girl said firmly. "The poor little fellow's probably scared enough as it is. You go fetch the others, Courage. I'll wait right here."

"I can't leave you alone."

"I'll be all right. Honestly. Anyway, you can run much faster than I, and get back that much quicker. And if worse comes to worst, I can always get away from the Vibes. They can't fly."

Courage didn't like it, but he knew the girl was right. "All right then, " he decided. "And I'm going to take a chance and fly so we can all get back in a jiffy."

"Should you? After what happened to me?"

"I'll take the chance. And I won't go high. You watch yourself very carefully, luv, and we'll be right back."

With a cheerful wave, he launched himself into the air and in a moment he vanished.

Joy stood across the trail from the rock, holding the guitar and continually shifting her gaze, but she saw nothing moving anywhere. It was so quiet! She plucked a few notes on the guitar. They didn't sound right in the dead, heavy air. She twisted the tuning pegs and tried the E string, running a finger up and down the vibrating filament to produce a thin, wailing run up and down the scale. That sounded better. She started to pluck another string when a movement across the way caught her eye.

She tensed. What was it? At first she didn't comprehend - and then her eyes grew wide. The rock! The huge mass of rock itself was moving!

Without a sound it moved to one side revealing a dark hole leading down into the ground. Joy had to admit she was frightened. Courage had been right. This must be the entrance to the hideout of the Vile Vibes. Cautiously, the girl approached the hole and tried to see what lay beyond it. But beyond a few feet of ordinary dirt and rock, everything was blackness. She shivered as a blast of cold air swept over her.

"Oh, Sparky," she cried softly at the thought that the firefly might be in such a horrible place. And by now she was convinced that he was. Joy glanced up at the sky, but she knew it was much too soon to expect the boys to return.

"Perhaps...perhaps if I just went a little way in," she suggested to herself. The girl didn't want to go in at all, but if she could help Sparky - or anyone else in trouble for that matter - Joy would face any danger. "Yes, I'll just go in a little bit," she declared in a half-whisper.

The side of the hole sloped sharply, but she was able, by moving carefully, to keep from sliding uncontrollably down into that unknown darkness. Little rock outcroppings, almost like crude stairs, made it easier than she thought it would be. As she went down, she discovered that the light from above penetrated further than she had expected. She still couldn't see anything ahead of her, but perhaps a few steps more...

All of a sudden, the light from above began to fade rapidly. Startled, Joy looked up - and stifled a scream. The rock was silently closing over her head.

CHAPTER TEN

Funky whirled Benita's feather boa around his head a few more times, creating a colorful swirl in the sunlit clearing, then pulled it through his paws.

"Come on, come on," Benita barked. "Isn't that thing dry yet?"

"Yah, yah," the rat replied, and handed the boa to the witch. "Goot as new," he said with a slight bow and a deferential smirk.

"Ye-uc-ch," she grimaced, snatching the wilted wrap from him. "Good as a thrift-shop reject." In spite of her words, she threw the boa around her. She felt undressed without it.

The sun was high overhead by now, and the witch and her flunkies were making themselves at home in the Bugaloos' clearing. Since their dunking in the stream, they hadn't mentioned the hunt for the Vile Vibes and their coveted machine, but now that Benita's clothes were dry at last she began to grow impatient again.

"I wonder where those creepy insects are," she wondered. Seated on a log near Joy's lily-pad pad, elbows on her knees and chin resting in her cupped hands, she looked morosely at the ground. "I should have come out here myself last night. With a helper like Funky, I don't need any more handicaps. If those bugs find the Sigmund Apparatus before I do, I'll..." She couldn't think of anything horrible enough and lapsed into brooding silence.

Funky came back from the edge of the clearing, carrying his Crawlle Talkie and awkwardly wheeling the Br-room-Br-room Bike. "Boss! Vat a nice surprise!"

Benita looked up. "What are you talking about?"

"You brought der Zapper! For me!"

"Yeah, yeah. Once we find those Vibes and the Bugaloo brats, we'll have to put 'em out of the way till we get back to the Penthouse. Is the Bike all right?"

"Yah. No damach."

"Better hadn't be, you dum-dum."

Funky glanced nervously at the sky. "Maybe it would be a good idea to leave. Dose bugs may be back."

"Hold yer horses," the witch snarled. "If the Vibes have made 'em chicken to fly, they won't be back for hours."

"Oh yah. I forgot." But just in case, Funky looked upward again - and nearly let the Bike fall.

"Mein leader! Look!"

The witch followed his pointing finger and jumped to her feet. Off in the distance was a flying figure, barely skimming the tree tops, and it wasn't any kind of bird she had ever seen. "It's one of the Bugaloos!" she exploded. "Those rotten sneaks, flying behind my back!"

"Ve better hide," Funky suggested, wheeling the Bike under a tree with low-hanging branches.

"Yeah...wait a minute. He's not coming this way. It looks like he's looking for something...Zowie!" The witch laughed triumphantly and slammed the poor rat on the back. "That's what it is: that's why he's flying. He's found the Vibes and he's looking for his bug buddies! Get outa the way, Kraut-snout. We can't lose him now."

Benita shoved the rat aside and mounted the motorcycle, starting up the engine with a roar that sent scores of birds into panicky flight.

"Vait, mein vitchie!" Funky squealed.

"Get on, get on. Hang onto the Zapper, fumble-fingers. Here we go."

They roared across the clearing, ploughed through a flower bed and just missed the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower. Benita kept her eyes mostly on the sky, glancing only occasionally at the path they were taking through the Forest. Behind her, Funky hung on precariously, terrified, as the witch careened along recklessly, sliding and wobbling on the turns and barely avoiding collisions with tree after tree.

Funky closed his eyes. Nervous sweat broke out on his face. "Yi! She's playink chicken mit der eucalyptuseseses," he wailed through chattering teeth.

"What's that?" the witch yelled.

"I vas...I vas sayink how nice you drive," Funky lied.

"Naturally. Keep an eye on those bugs. I gotta watch out for these crazy trees that keep jumping out in front of me."

Funky was glad to obey. He certainly didn't want to watch where they were going. He had a weak heart, which had developed about a minute and a half ago.

They had gone a mile or so when Funky suddenly tapped Benita on the shoulder. "Boss! Geshtoppen!"

"Whaddya mean?"

"Up dere! Look!"

The witch skidded to a halt and looked skyward. "Aha! Three of 'em now. And goin' like bats out of...a cave at sundown."

"Dey're flying der udder vay now."

"I can see that. I don't need subtitles." Benita turned the Bike around quickly but awkwardly, almost throwing the rat to the ground. When she started out again, he was sorry she hadn't.

"Where did they go? Which way?" the witch cried as they sped back toward the clearing.

"Dat vay," the rat replied, pointing in a vague direction that could have been anywhere between East and West. Then he caught a glimpse of one of the Bugaloos through the tree tops in the distance. "Dere dey are!" he cried.

"Yeah, and they're getting away from us. Hang on, Funky. It's time to get some real speed outa this thing."

The rat would have fainted, but he didn't dare, not at the rate they were going.

"Well, we made it, mates," Courage said as the three Bugaloo boys glided down to a landing beside the tall rock column. "Nothing interfered with our flying. I guess the Vibes are out to lunch or something."

"You know," Harmony remarked, "I could have sworn I heard something back there that sounded exactly like a motorcycle."

"A motorcycle?" I.Q. laughed. "In Tranquility Forest? Impossible."

Harmony nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right. Those Vibes have got us all hearing things...Wait a minute!"

The others looked at him questioningly.

Turning slowly in a full circle, Harmony scanned the entire clearing and the surrounding woods. "Where's Joy?"

Courage pointed.. "I left her...right...over...there..." His voice sounded like a record on a turntable that was losing power. "Joy! JOY! Blimey, mates, if anything's happened to her I'll never forgive myself."

They began to search frantically in the vicinity, calling her name, and it was Harmony who first heard a distant reply. "Joy?" he called again, and this time the response was closer. A moment later the girl appeared, walking slowly, head down, all but dragging I.Q.'s guitar in the dirt behind her. "What is it?" Harmony cried as she approached. The others came running over.

"Joy!" Courage exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness you're all right."

"Anything wrong?" I.Q. wanted to know when the girl still didn't raise her head.

"Oh my," she said in a sobbing voice. "I'm so ashamed of myself."

"What do you mean?" Courage asked. "What happened to you?"

She raised her head slightly and pointed toward the towering rock. "It started to close above me, and I lost my nerve. I panicked. I ran. I was afraid. Afraid! In Tranquility Forest! How shameful of me!"

It took some time and patient questioning, but at last the boys got a coherent story from the distressed girl. When it sank in, Courage's eyes popped as he stared at the towering rock.

"You mean to say the whole thing moved? Just like that?"

Joy nodded glumly. "It simply...slid aside. And I went in, just a little way, and it started to close. It's a miracle I got out at all. It nearly nipped off my toes."

"Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of," I.Q. pointed out. "I'd be rather grateful, myself."

"But don't you see? Sparky must be down there, and I could have helped him." She gazed ruefully at the solid mass of rock. "Now we may never be able to get back in again to rescue him."

"Hold on," Harmony protested. "You say the rock just moved? You didn't do anything?"

"I was simply standing over here. Like this." She moved to a tree. "And I was...well, for something to do, I was tuning the guitar..."

"The guitar!" Harmony exclaimed. "That must be it!"

"I don't understand," the girl said.

"These blighters do all their dirty work with sound. That must be what controls that rock, or door, or whatever you want to call it."

I.Q. was already taking his guitar from the girl's hands to run his fingers lightly over the strings. "It is a bit out of tune," he remarked.

"I'm sorry," Joy apologized. "It didn't sound right down here."

"That's all right, luv. Tell me now. Exactly what did you do?"

Joy told him, and I.Q. did the same, running his finger up and down the E string. All the Bugaloos had their eyes glued to the massive rock.

Nothing happened.

"Vot are dey doink?" Havink a cham session?" Funky hissed.

"Shut up!" Benita hissed back. The pair had left the motorcycle hidden back up the trail to creep up and spy on the Bugaloos. Funky struggled under the weight of the Stereo Zapper, but he didn't so much as breathe hard. That was verboten when spying.

"Ach! Dot screechy note he keeps playink. Dose Bugaloos haff no ear for music."

"Quiet! Just keep the Zapper ready in case we need it. Those brats are on to something or my name's not Benita Bizarre." Too late, she remembered that her real name was something quite different. She'd had to change it the last time she'd been run out of another town in a place far away. But it didn't make any difference, because it was soon evident the Bugaloos were indeed onto something, and she felt like shouting to them to get on with it.

I.Q. shook his head in exasperation. "It must have been just one absolutely precise note. If the peg has slipped only the tiniest fraction, we've lost it."

"Oh dear," Joy said miserably.

"It's not your fault," I.Q. reassured her. "Here, you take it again. Maybe all it needs is the touch of your fingers."

The girl took the guitar and ran her fingers up and down the string as she had earlier. But still the rock remained unmoved. "I guess maybe it was just a coincidence," she said at last.

But I.Q. wasn't giving up that easily. "You keep playing that string," he said. "And I'll just keep turning the peg. Hold it steady now. Go!"

As the girl played, I.Q. turned the tuning peg a hair-line fraction of a degree. And again. And again. The rock just sat there, and it seemed as though its seamed and cracked face was mocking them.

"All right, I'll try it the other way," I.Q. said, and began turning the peg in the other direction. The plucked string moaned and shrieked in the stillness of the tiny clearing, its effect almost hypnotic on the intensely concentrating Bugaloos. As a matter of fact, the rock swung almost halfway open before Harmony spotted it.

"Hey, mates!" he yelled. "That did the shovel and pick!"

They all ran to the dark hole that now lay open before them and stared down into the darkness. "O-o-h, that's a nasty looking place, isn't it?" Harmony commented in a subdued voice.

"The Viles Vibes ought to be right at home down there," I.Q. remarked with a little laugh. He looked at the others. "I suppose there's no question about it. This must be their hideout."

The others agreed.

"I wonder what's down there," Harmony said.

"Only one way to fine out, mates," Courage declared, and began lowering himself into the hole.

"Wait a minute," I.Q. cautioned. He looked at the rock closely, shaking his head in what might have been admiration. "Clever beasts, those Vibes. And I dare say that the moment we're inside they'll close the thing up on us again, the way they almost got Joy."

It was a sobering thought, but Courage wasn't daunted. "I say we cross that bridge when we get to it," he said. "We've found what we've been looking for. Let's go down there and get this business over with. One way or another."

I.Q. nodded in agreement. "We can get in. We'll find a way to get out." He smiled gently at Joy. "Best let me take the guitar, luv. We're likely to need it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Run, run! Come on, molasses-legs!" Benita berated the rat as she sprinted toward the hole under the rock column. Behind her Funky was laboring under the burden of the Zapper, his short legs wobbling weakly. As they neared their goal, the huge mass of stone began to move, slowly and silently, back over the hole.

Benita reached the brink and was about to dive through the remaining space when she pulled up short. "Wait a minute! Am I outa my mind?"

Puffing up in her wake, Funky had an answer for that but he wisely held his tongue. As the two stood there, the rock slid into place and their opportunity was lost. Benita turned on the rat.

"You wart-witted stumblebum! If you weren't so slow, we'd have been right in there with 'em." The witch smacked her hand against the side of the rock and yowled with pain.

"But, mein leader, ve have dem vere ve vant 'em," Funky pointed out with a sly grin. "Dey are in dere. Und ve..." He hefted the Zapper significantly. "Ve are out here. Ven dey come out...ZAP!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's just what I was about to say."

"Uff course," the rat went on, "might be dey never come out. Dose ugly things, dey maybe eat the Bugaloos right up."

To his consternation, Benita didn't seem completely enthralled by the prospect. "If that happens, buster, you better not let me get my hands on you."

"But, gorgeous vitchie! I don't understand..."

Benita shook a finger in his face. "Listen. If anybody's gonna do in those Bugaloos, it's gonna be little old Benita. Got that? I'm not letting any foreigners muscle in on my territory."

Funky nodded his understanding. She had a point there. "Uh-h...vot's your plan now, boss?" he asked meekly.

The witch heaved an agitated sigh, looking around her for something that might give her inspiration. She didn't relish the idea of simply waiting there in the hope that the Bugaloos would...some time...come back from wherever they had gone. On the other hand, she wasn't going to budge from this place until she either found a way to get in or was positive that the Bugaloos were done for.

"If I only had a guitar," she muttered. "I have one," she realized, but way back in Rock City. She looked at Funky. Could she trust him to do a simple task? Maybe she could leave him here to watch for the Bugaloos. No. If they came back out while she was gone, he'd be sure to bungle the job.

"Vy don't I call Voofer and Tveeter on der Crawlle Talkie," the rat suggested.

Benita jumped and glanced sharply at him. "What are ya doing, reading my mind?"

Funky cringed. "Oh nein, mein leader. How could I do anything like dat?"

The witch looked at him suspiciously, but decided he wasn't bright enough to be insulting her.

"Nein," he repeated. "But you have a guitar back at der Penthouse, und maybe ve can use it der vay der Bugaloos did..."

"Yeah, only how are they gonna get it to me here?"

"In der car?" the rat suggested weakly.

"What?! Trust those twerps with my beautiful Baroque Buggy?!" She gave the rat a cuff for suggesting such a thing. "Huh-uh. We'll just wait here. Maybe they'll be out in a few minutes anyway. Get over behind that tree there and be ready with the Zapper. I'm gonna go back to the Bike and see if that spaghetti-head Woofer remembered to pack me a lunch."

As the total, smothering darkness descended over the Bugaloos, someone chuckled.

"What was that?" Joy gasped.

Again the laugh. "It was only me," I.Q. said, and at the same time bits of light began to dance in the blackness. "When Courage said it appeared the Vibes were underground somewhere, I thought we might be able to use these," he explained as he handed each of his companions a Fluorescent Flasher. Their light wasn't very strong, but it was enough to show them the way they were going - which was mostly down.

"You think of everything, don't you?" Courage said with a laugh.

"I try to," I.Q. replied matter-of-factly. "But remember, these have had only half a day of sunlight, so they won't last for more than a few hours."

"Let's hope we don't have to be down here that long," Harmony laughed.

"Do you suppose they can see in the darkness?" Courage wondered.

"It's a possibility," I.Q. replied.

"I wonder where they are," Joy said. She seemed to have recovered her good spirits, and her stride was almost jaunty as she moved down the sloping rock floor just behind Courage, who was leading the way. Even with the aid of the lights, they couldn't see much. On each side of them, rough stone walls pressed in close, forcing them to move in single file. From time to time, they saw patches of deeper blackness in the dark, indicating what might be side passages, but the Bugaloos stayed on the main track.

"They're probably watching us right this moment," I.Q. said cheerfully, indicating the side passages with a wave of his light.

"That's a comforting thought," Harmony said wryly.

"Well, we're in their territory, and I can't imagine they're unaware of our presence."

"If the Vibes are here at all," Joy added.

"What does that mean?" Courage challenged.

"Perhaps this isn't their hideout at all. Perhaps this place has nothing to do with Gort and his people at all."

I.Q. laughed with gentle scorn at the idea, but as they continued down into the cold, damp darkness, he couldn't help contemplating the possibility that the girl could be right.

The passage began to level off, and the Bugaloos felt rather than saw that it was becoming wider. In a few more minutes, they found themselves in a broad chamber of rough-hewn rock. They couldn't see as far as the walls on either side of them, but the ceiling was so low they could almost touch it.

"Hold up a bit, mates," Courage suggested. He held his light high, but all he could see was walls of dull stone. Together they made a slow, careful circuit of the chamber. They found no other passages leading from it than the one from which they had entered.

"Looks like the end of the line," Harmony observed.

"Perhaps we should have taken one of the side passages back there," Joy said.

"Sure, but which one?" Courage asked.

They all turned to I.Q. for the answer to that one, but he was deep in thought.

"Sparky!"

Joy's cry echoed dully in the chamber, but in the silence that followed they heard a sound they hadn't noticed before.

"What's that noise?" Courage asked, not expecting an answer. It sounded vaguely familiar, and there was nothing remotely menacing about it.

"Noise?" I.Q. queried. "Oh yes, now I hear it." He moved with Courage toward the sound, which seemed to be coming from a remote corner of the chamber. Without too much difficulty, they traced it to a spot near the floor. I.Q. held his light close to it, then straightened and laughed.

"Well, at least we shan't die of thirst down here. There's water trickling in here."

They continued to explore the chamber, but it apparently held no secrets. It was just an ordinary cave, nothing more.

"Perhaps Joy's right after all," Courage remarked, unable to conceal his disappointment.

"Cheer up," I.Q. said. "If this were the Vile Vibes' hideout, they probably would have rushed out and grabbed us by now anyway."

"With what?" Courage asked. "They've got no arms, remember?"

I.Q. laughed. "That's true, isn't it. But I imagine they have their little ways. Shall we start back? Let's hope the E string will open that rock from the inside."

"And we'll have to start looking for the Vibes all over again," Courage said gloomily.

"And Sparky," Joy added.

"Oh, he's probably back at the clearing by now," I.Q. said, "being terrorized by a ravaging beast of a bunny rabbit."

"Maybe we should explore some of those side passages before we leave," Courage persisted.

"I don't suppose that could hurt," I.Q. agreed. He started toward the passageway that would take them back, waving his softly glowing light back and forth. And back and forth, back and forth, back and...

"What's wrong?" Harmony asked.

"That's funny. I can't seem to locate the entry. I thought it was right over here."

"It's easy to get disoriented underground in the dark," Harmony said easily. When he was just a small boy, he had spent a lot of time buzzing around in an old abandoned mine, so he knew what he was talking about. He moved ahead of I.Q., holding his light high.

"Did you find it?" Courage called.

"It's right over...hm-m-m...I could have sworn it was right here." He slapped his palm against the cold rock, then laughed sheepishly. "I must have been wrong," he said, and started to hold his light higher but his hand hit the ceiling with unexpected force. "Ouch!" he exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" I.Q. asked.

"The ceiling's lower than I thought here." Harmony reached up, cautiously this time - and he made contact before his hand was barely above his head. "Hey!" he yelled in alarm. "The ceiling's coming down!"

"Over here, too!" Courage shouted. "Down, everyone!"

The Bugaloos quickly bent over, ears straining to hear, eyes straining to see. There was no sound, and all they could see was solid blackness slowly but inexorably descending on them.

"We'll be crushed!" Joy cried.

"Don't be frightened, luv," Courage said.

"Oh, I'm not frightened," the girl insisted, smiling brightly.

"Can't you find that entry?" I.Q. called to Harmony.

"It's not there anymore. We're sealed in."

"Well...then we may as well relax." I.Q. sat down and cradled his guitar in his lap. "Any requests?"

"It'd be nice if you could stumble across a note that would get us out of here," Courage suggested.

"Yes, it would. But don't count on it." He strummed a soft chord, then another, and looked up at the ceiling. It was still descending relentlessly, and possibly a little faster.

Suddenly Joy laughed.

"What's funny?" Harmony asked.

"I was thinking about Benita. Right now I feel a bit sorry for her."

"Benita?"

"Yes. You know, she's been trying to do us in for so long, and now she'll be terribly disappointed."

"Too bad for Benita."

"But think of it," the girl went on brightly. "All of a sudden we're about to...disappear, and Benita will never know what happened to us. Terribly frustrating, don't you think?"

Harmony found it difficult to share the girl's sympathy, and he was trying to frame a retort when he suddenly fell over on his side. "I say!" he cried.

"We're going over!" Courage exclaimed.

The floor that had been solid and level had, without warning, tilted sharply beneath the Bugaloos. In the featureless darkness, they slid and tumbled and rolled uncontrollably, over the slick, bumpy rock that gave them nothing to hold on to, nothing to stop their precipitous drop into nothingness.

Harmony was the last to go. He had been holding a hand against the ceiling to check its rate of descent. He saw the others falling, and a moment later he was tumbling after them, rolling over and over, arms flailing. His hand slammed against something solid, and he grabbed it instinctively. It seemed to be an edge, a corner of solid stone. Whatever it was, he was able to arrest his fall. The light was torn from his grasp, and as he hung suspended he watched it tumble with the other Bugaloos into the slanting darkness.

For a long time Harmony kept his desperate grip on the edge of stone, debating whether to let go and join the others or hang on where he was. Neither course offered much in the way of a future.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The light seemed to come from everywhere. Blue light, shimmering and softly dazzling. The three Bugaloos were dazed from their endless tumbling fall, and the light was more a hindrance than a help to their befuddled senses.

"Where are we?" Joy breathed.

I.Q. laughed shortly. "Lower than we were before. That's about all we can be certain of."

Courage seemed almost cheerful. "Well, I guess there's no question about it now."

"About what?" I.Q. asked.

"That this is the place we're looking for. Who else but the Vibes could do things like that with solid rock?"

I.Q. chuckled. "Your reasoning isn't a hundred percent, Courage, but let's all pray you're right."

"Why do you say that?" Joy asked.

"Because if it's not the Vibes doing all this, then they're not the only mischief makers in Tranquility Forest."

"You are quite right," a strange voice echoed.

The Bugaloos scrambled to their feet, looking for the speaker. As they stood, the lights began to fade and lose their color. Then, a moment later, they started to glow more strongly until soon the Bugaloos could see where they were.

"Well bless my second cousin Harriet!" Courage exclaimed in awe.

They were in a vast cavern, its ceiling so high they couldn't even see it. On all sides, slender columns of rock stretched up into the darkness, like stalactites and stalagmites in a limestone cave. These, however, were regular in dimension, though their diameters varied. The light seemed to come from the rock itself, not unlike the Bugaloos' own Fluorescent Flashlights.

"Are we still in Tranquility Forest?" Joy asked, her eyes wide with amazement.

"Under it," I.Q. amended.

"How could there have been a place like this and we not know it?" Courage wanted to know.

"It was not here." That same voice boomed through the chamber, bounding and reverberating. There was no way to tell where it came from.

"Who are you?" Courage shouted suddenly. "Why don't you come out and show yourself?"

There was no response but the repeated echoes of his own voice.

The Bugaloos stood motionless for a long time, unable to decide on a course of action. As it happened, they had no choice anyway, as Joy was the first to discover.

"Look!" she cried softly, pointing off into the shadowed fringes of the cavern.

"It's the blistering Vibes," Courage said.

"Over this way too," I.Q. said calmly. "And I believe in that direction as well."

The Vibes were all around them, moving slowly toward them in shuffling, awkward steps as though they were accustomed to more vigorous strides. And they made not a single sound as they advanced, pop-eyes unwinking, on the Bugaloos.

"I'm not frightened," Joy declared in a tense whisper.

Courage leaned over to speak softly to I.Q. "Let's fly out of here. They can't get at us when we're in the air."

I.Q. was about to say something, but before he could speak Courage had taken off and was starting to spiral toward the unseen ceiling. But he was only a few feet off the floor when two of the Vibes, with astonishing speed, launched themselves on their powerful legs and rammed the flying Bugaloo like missiles. Courage tumbled to the floor, the breath knocked from him.

"Oh, Courage! Are you all right?" Joy asked as she hurried to him.

"I think so," he replied with a rueful grin. "That was rather like being hit by an unexpected football." He got to his feet and determined that at worst he would have a few bruises, nothing more.

Joy looked behind her. The Vibes had stopped their advance, forming a wide circle around the Bugaloos. The girl shuddered in spite of herself. They were loathsome creatures, and there was no denying it.

"Why do they just stand there and stare?" Courage said. "If they're going to attack us, then let them get on with it!" He balled his fists and stood ready to put up a violent struggle.

"There will be no attack," the strange voice echoed, and this time the Bugaloos didn't have to wonder who the speaker was. The words were still reverberating in the chamber when an object hurtled through the air over the heads of the Vibes to land in the circle in front of the Bugaloos. They jumped back involuntarily, then stared at the creature that stood before them.

He looked like a Vibe, but he wore a robe of some sort of shimmering fabric over a vest of metallic material, and in some indefinable way he was a shade less repulsive than the others. Joy was the first to spot the real difference in him.

"Look!" she breathed. "He has arms."

"So I do," the Vibe said in a deep and surprisingly musical voice, following his words with a rolling chuckle.

"Who are you?" Courage demanded, not to be taken in by this Vibe's apparent good nature.

The Vibe bowed slightly. "I am Sigmund the Seventh, son of Sigmund the Sixth, sometimes called 'the Sick,' but no matter."

"That tells us a lot," Courage said sarcastically.

The Vibe's protruding eyes blinked expressionlessly, and for a moment he was all menace. But then he grinned, his teeth gleaming softly in the gentle light. "That's the trouble with people. They ask a question and

they they're angry when the answer isn't what they expect. I am the ruler of the beings you call Vibes." Sigmund cocked his head to one side. "Vibes. I rather like that. Yes."

"Vile Vibes," Courage said.

Again Sigmund blinked, and it changed his whole appearance in a chilling way. "We'll have to discuss that at a later time," he said tonelessly.

"What have you done with Sparky?" Joy wanted to know.

"The hysterical firefly? Oh, he's quite safe. I'm afraid we had to put him to sleep for a while until he can learn to calm down."

I.Q. stepped forward. "Where do you...people...come from? How did you get here? What is this place? How do you do the tricks with the rocks?"

The Vibe regarded him expressionlessly. "Have you any more questions?" he asked when I.Q. fell silent.

"Those will do for now."

"Then let me answer them. First, we come from many places, in none of which we have been welcome." Sigmund spread his robe with his stunted arms, which were scarcely more than flippers with fingers. "As you can see, we're not attractive to look at. Down through the ages we have been driven from place after place, reviled simply because of our appearance. Now we are in Tranquility Forest, and we shall not leave. Second, we came here by water, of course. We're rather good swimmers, as you might imagine." He lifted a foot and spread his webbed toes. "As for this place...why, it's our home."

"And the rocks? How do you make the rocks move?"

Sigmund smirked. "That's what you might call our specialty. You call us the Vibes, which I understand to be short for vibrations, and you are quite right. Vibrations...sound...are our tools and weapons. With the Sigmund Apparatus - which I have brought to new heights in power and efficiency - we can move anything. Or destroy it. I can make a bird fall from the sky...by the way, I apologize for that. It was an accident." He bowed to Joy.

"Are you trying to make us believe that you can move huge masses of rock just with sound?" Courage demanded skeptically.

Sigmund turned to him. "I should think you'd believe it by now. What were your feelings, Bugaloo, when the ceiling of the chamber up there was descending on you? Eh?" He turned away without waiting for an answer and spoke to I.Q. "As I was saying, with the Sigmund Apparatus, which was developed by the first Sigmund many thousands of years ago, we can build, change, or destroy." He gestured. "This cavern did not exist when we arrived in the Forest. We made it, in approximately forty-three seconds, from solid rock. Rather nice, isn't it?"

"A bit chilly," Joy remarked.

"For you, perhaps."

I.Q. shook his head admiringly. "I wish you'd explain all this in a bit more detail. It's really quite fascinating."

Once more the Vibe blinked. "Your curiosity is flattering," he said flatly, "but I fear it would take several years to bring you to a full understanding of the workings of the Sigmund Apparatus. Very briefly, however, I will say this: As the voice of a human being can, under certain conditions, shatter a wine glass, so we can topple a palm tree or turn a mountain to dust. As thunder can rattle a window pane, so we can set a whole city to trembling. And as a passing truck can make a plate dance across a table, we can move incalculable tons of rock." He flipped his robe around him and began to pace back and forth in front of the Bugaloos, caught up in his own rhetoric. "History knows us, but does not acknowledge us. They speak with awe of the Great Pyramids of Egypt. Astounding, now those huge masses of stone were carried to such great heights by mere man. Mere men!" he scoffed. "Mere Vibes! But did we get the credit? Never! They had to put on a show with all those slaves and things, while we were hidden away. Too ugly to be seen, to be acknowledged." He chuckled. "Wait till the archaeologists start digging under the Great Pyramid. Will they ever get a surprise!"

"What sort?" I.Q. asked.

"Hah! Before we left, we made a duplicate of the Great Pyramid directly under it. A negative, you understand, a cavern much like this but shaped exactly like the Pyramid itself, as if it were the mold, so to speak. But we had our revenge in other ways too, of course."

"How was that?" Courage asked, so intrigued by the Vibe's ranting that he forgot to be truculent.

"Well...since credit has been given to other...agencies...down through the centuries, I don't want to disillusion you. But...think about it. The Egyptians lost a great host of slaves because they were miraculously able to cross the Red Sea. Remember? The water rolling back to let them pass and then CRASHING back to destroy their pursuers?" The Vibe puffed out his chest. "We don't forget easily."

"Excuse me," Joy put in. "Mister...Sigmund? May I ask you a question?"

"By all means."

"Well...how is it that you can talk?" she asked hesitantly, fearing she might offend him.

But the Vibe drew himself up with a broad smile. "Why, that's because I am of the Royal line. The rulers of the Vibes have retained the power of speech - just as we have retained our arms." He lifted his pitiful little appendages with obvious pride.

"And the others?" Joy looked around at the silent circle. "They can't speak? Any of them?"

Sigmund shrugged. "I suppose they could if they really tried, but they prefer to sing. Can you blame them?"

Joy smiled. "It's rather pretty. Was it you and your...apparatus...that broke in on Peter Platter's broadcast yesterday?"

Sigmund nodded. "A bit of childish nonsense, I'm afraid. It was a test of the Sigmund Apparatus, and I felt that after making that unpleasant squawking sound, which might be mistaken for normal interference, I'd demonstrate that it was not an accident."

"I see. You were demonstrating...exactly what?"

"That my powers are unlimited," Sigmund said matter-of-factly. "I don't wish to destroy Rock City if it's not entirely necessary."

"I thought you were just going to...to take over Tranquility Forest," the girl said.

"Oh, that Gort. He tells terrible lies. Actually, first we will control Tranquility Forest. Knock down all those awful trees, get rid of the birds and the rabbits..."

"But why would you want to do that?" Joy cried in a shocked voice.

The Vibe shrugged. "It's in our blood, I suppose. Though we live under the ground, we prefer above us the sort of desert country our most remote ancestors came from. Perhaps you noticed. We're already beginning to drain the water from the stream that runs through your clearing."

"But...you can't do that!"

Sigmund smiled smugly. "Oh yes we can. As a matter of fact..." He turned and gestured dramatically. "The Sigmund Apparatus is now ready to begin the final phase of our conquest of Tranquility Forest. And when that is completed, we'll move on Rock City. I hope we won't have to destroy it." He wheeled suddenly and regarded the Bugaloos expressionlessly. "We've never been able to keep any slaves before. Normal humans usually die of fright when they see us. Perhaps all that will change now. Yes. Slaves would be nice."

"Hold on now," I.Q. put in. "You say your...Sigmund Apparatus is ready? What was wrong with it?"

The Vibe turned to him with a look of astonishment. "Didn't you hear my answer to your quite sensible question?"

"Which one?"

"As to how we got here."

"You said you...swam?"

"Of course. And the Sigmund Apparatus got wet! Salt water is very bad for it. We're always having to repair it."

I.Q. couldn't hold back a smile. "I wonder...may we see it?"

Sigmund hesitated, then flicked a suspicious glance at I.Q. "You are a scientist?" he asked.

"No, I'm just a Bugaloo. But I'm awfully curious. It must have taken a real genius to develop a machine that can do so many amazing things."

"It's not a machine. It's an Apparatus," the Vibe corrected I.Q., but he was clearly flattered.

"But may we see it?"

Sigmund shrugged. "There's no way I can prevent you," he said.

"I don't understand."

"You're standing in it."

"We...what?"

Sigmund grinned. "Look around you. What does this chamber look like? Think hard now. Imagine you are a giant and you are standing somewhere outside, looking at this chamber."

I.Q. and the other Bugaloos looked slowly around the vast chamber, with its soaring columns of stone of many sizes.

"Blimey!" Courage breathed. "It looks like the inside of...of an organ!"

"Precisely!" Sigmund said gleefully.

I.Q. turned to the Vibe with a puzzled frown. "But how do you...how do you make it work? I mean, you didn't bring this with you when you crossed the sea."

"Oh, of course not. I told you, we made it. But I've been a bit unfair with you. This chamber is really only a part of the Sigmund Apparatus. We build one like it wherever we go. To activate it, we have a combination of two things." Sigmund opened his cape slightly, then closed it quickly. "The part that is in my possession will have to remain my secret. Let's just say that it is a device for...focusing, directing the power of the vibrations that we create. And there," he went on, gesturing with a wide sweep of his arms, "is the other element that makes the Sigmund Apparatus all-powerful."

The Bugaloos looked around, but they had no idea what the Vibe was talking about. He was obviously pleased by their confusion, and he chuckled.

"You're looking at them, Bugaloos. Five hundred Vibes. Exactly five hundred of them, each with a voice powerful enough by itself to shatter your eardrums. Together, amplified by the Organ Chamber of living rock and focused by this...device...they are the most powerful force in the world. Soon you shall have a demonstration."

The Bugaloos looked at each other. "He's a bit daft," Courage whispered to I.Q. "Wouldn't you say?"

"I wish that were all. I'm afraid I believe he can do what he says."

"That device he mentions. Perhaps we can..."

"Don't even consider it, Bugaloos," Sigmund broke in. With a disdainful smile, he unbuttoned the glittering vest he wore under his coat and opened it briefly. On his chest was a complex cluster of tiny knobs and buttons, with wires apparently imbedded in his flesh. The Vibe quickly closed his vest again.

"That is the heart of the Sigmund Apparatus," he said proudly. "Even I do not know now the first Sigmund came by it, but it has been handed down through each succeeding ruler, a part of us, never to be removed until the thousand years or so of our lifetimes have come to an end."

"We could take it off you," Courage suggested.

"I doubt it," the Vibe said, glancing significantly at the horde of his followers pressing around them. "And even if you could, it would kill me. And even I know, Bugaloos can't kill."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harmony pressed back in the shadows of the Organ Chamber, listening to the ruler of the Vibes as he spoke to the other Bugaloos. Harmony had made his way carefully down the steeply sloping ramp, reaching the vast

cavern just before the ramp had lifted and closed behind him. None of the Vibes had seen him - as far as he knew.

"...and sound is a very precise entity," Sigmund was saying, obviously enjoying the opportunity to expound on his favorite subject. "For instance, when you accidentally produced the exact note that opened our gate up on the surface, you did it only by the most remote chance. Pure luck. But when you did it again, that was almost inevitable, because your instrument is limited in the sounds - the vibrations - it can produce. But we knew you would be back, so we prepared your passage for you."

"I don't get that," Courage said.

"Not surprising," the Vibe said complacently. "We simply created that easy route for you, down to the chamber with the...rather terrifying ceiling. It was terrifying, wasn't it?" he asked, as though he weren't quite certain.

"It certainly was," Joy reassured him.

"Splendid." Sigmund rubbed his tiny hands together. "No, Bugaloos, you might have found your way through the series of rather confusing passages that already existed here, but I saw no reason why you should be inconvenienced. You see," he added, "we're not really bad Vibes. We do not cause pain or even inconvenience if it's not necessary."

"That ceiling coming down on us was a bit of a crusher," Courage pointed out.

"But I had to do that in order to make you sit down. Otherwise, when I tilted the floor, you might have been hurt."

There was no arguing with that kind of logic.

Harmony pondered the situation. He had heard everything Sigmund said to the other Bugaloos, and frankly, he was scared. From where he stood he could look out over the vast sea of grey backs, the ferocious snouts, and protruding eyes of the Vibes as they stared at their ruler and the Bugaloos. Harmony was tempted to go charging in to the rescue, but he knew it was hopeless. The numbers were simply too overwhelming.

"...begin by getting rid of all those nasty trees just above us," Sigmund was saying. "That's your clearing, by the way." He glanced up toward the ceiling. "It's understandable that you might be a bit distressed over that. We understand your feelings. But it has to be done."

Harmony shuddered. He felt so helpless.

Sigmund lifted his arms and turned in a slow, majestic circle. The Vibes distended their throats and a low humming sound began to fill the room. Sigmund shook his head and signaled them to stop. Opening his vest, he adjusted a knob. "Let's try it again," he commanded.

Harmony moved cautiously away from his hiding place. There was a chance, a wild, almost hopeless chance, but it was the only thing he could think of, and he didn't have time to contemplate other measures.

"This is just a warm-up, you understand," Sigmund said. "Building up power, so to speak. We'll topple a few palm trees and turn them to dust, that's all. But afterward we'll go to work on creating our desert."

As the Vibes began their low humming again, Harmony crept with excruciating caution down into the chamber. The light barely touched the spot where he was, and he was thankful for the color of his skin. With a lot of caution and an equal amount of luck he might...

He got it! No one had seen him, and he retreated back to the shadows with his prize. Now, he told himself, there was the problem of making his way back to the rock column that guarded the gate - and moving it. Cradling I.Q.'s guitar tenderly in his arms, he started back up the steep stone ramp, thanking his lucky stars - and those of the rest of the Bugaloos - that the Vibes hadn't noticed the instrument that I.Q. had lost in his tumbling slide into the Organ Chamber.

On his way down from the chamber where they had been trapped, Harmony had noticed a narrow passage angling off from the ramp. When he reached it, he took a deep breath, wished he hadn't lost his light, and plunged in.

The darkness was total, and Harmony had the odd sensation of being weightless. It was hard to tell which way up, down or sideways, and he had the feeling that his eyes were bulging out of his head in an effort to find

some stray rays of light. But there were none, not a glimmer, where Harmony was. He could rely only on his sense of touch and the hope that no matter how many twists and turns he had to make, his instinct for direction would lead him back to the entrance. If he had stopped to think about it, he would have realized how hopeless it was, but he didn't. Getting out of the cavern was only a small part of what he had to do, and his brain was busy with the much more complex task that lay beyond mere escape.

"Uh-h...mein leader." Funky tapped the witch on the shoulder tentatively.

"Wha? What is it..." Benita snapped her eyes open and jerked her head around, totally confused after her little nap - which had lasted all afternoon. "What is it now? Did the Looksee Radar come? Open it up, you blubber-brain...where am I?"

She looked around at the unfamiliar sight of trees and grass and starlit sky, and it was another moment or two before she realized where she was. The witch scrambled to her feet. "What's going on here? Who turned off the lights?"

"I vass trying to tell you, Boss. It's dark. Iss maybe ve should be tryink sometink else?"

"Something else? Oh. Oh, yeah. The insects. The Sigmund Apparatus. Uh-h...where are they?"

"Still down dere," the rat said, gesturing toward the rock.

"You mean you haven't seen 'em come up?" The witch lashed out at him with her palm. "You sneaky snoozer! I know you've been asleep on the job. The Bugaloos would never stay in a disgusting underground place like that for this long!"

"But, vitchie! I never closed mein eyes! I swear it! Nothing has come out of dere. Der rock hasn't moved vun teeny weeny little inch!"

"Yeah?" the witch said uncertainly. She looked up at the dark sky and rubbed the end of her needle-nose. "Okay," she said at last. "Call the knuckleheads on the Crawlle Talkie and tell 'em to bring the guitar. We've gotta get in there, and there's no use waiting any longer."

Funky was delighted. "Yah, yah. I go call now." He started back to where the Bike and the two-way radio were concealed.

"Wait a minute!" Benita hissed.

"Now vot?" the rat sighed. "I mean...yes?"

"Shut up!" the witch commanded in urgent tones. "Look! It's opening!"

In the starlit darkness, they watched as the towering column of stone silently swung aside.

"Mein leader...?" Funky whimpered. "Iss der Vile Vibes coming after us?"

"There's nothing coming," the witch spat disgustedly. "But we're going." She started to get up, the froze. "Don't move!" she ordered.

They didn't really see what it was that streaked up from the hole, only that it was something dark and that it flew with reckless speed. Benita had the fantastic notion that it was carrying a guitar, but that wasn't possible. Was it?

"Vot vas dot?" Funky quavered.

"A bat, maybe. Who cares. Come on now. This is our chance." The witch grabbed Funky by the arm and half-dragged him toward the cave entrance. This time they made it with plenty of time to spare, and it was only as the rock closed over their heads that Benita stopped to wonder how they were ever going to get out of there again.

"Something coming. Something coming," the Bluebell Flower bonged routinely.

The grapes swiveled their heads around and shook the vine that connected them to the rest of the Forest.

"Flying," said one.

"Definitely airborne," another affirmed.

"Fast," a third offered.

"And landing."

The Bluebell Flower sighed. "It's only Harmony, and he's alone. Alone?!"

Harmony dropped to the turf in the clearing and marched straight to the organ, putting I.Q.'s guitar down on the platform beside him. He was carrying a Fluorescent Flashlight that he had picked up on the way from the cavern, but he didn't need it. He could play the keyboard in the dark, and it was up to his fingers now.

As he sat down, a deep, throbbing sound suddenly filled the air. Beside him, a palm tree began to tremble. He didn't even bother to look up. He knew what was happening.

"What is it?" the Bluebell Flower quavered.

Harmony looked over with a grim expression. "Don't bug me now, Ding-dong. I've got a little problem."

He began to play the organ, searching for the right combination of notes with frantic haste. Above him, the trembling tree swayed and groaned, ready to burst from its roots, but Harmony ignored it. If it fell on him it would fall on him, he reflected grimly - but if he couldn't stop it they were all lost anyway.

"What's that terrible sound?" a grape complained.

"It's Harmony in his nightmare bag," another explained.

"Quiet!" the Bluebell Flower bonged. "I'm getting the most painful vibrations!"

The notes from the organ rolled out in the clearing - weird, mournful sounds that set even Harmony's teeth on edge. He felt the bandstand shaking under him. A palm frond dropped off the tree and fell on the instrument. He brushed it aside and kept playing, frantically trying to hit just the right notes...

"There seems to be a problem of some sort," Sigmund said with what was apparently a frown. With a Vibe it wasn't easy to tell.

"You mean you can't knock down our Forest after all?" Courage grinned.

"It's just a technical matter!" the Vibe snapped as he fiddled with his buttons and knobs. "There is...Gort!"

One of the Vibes from the circle hopped forward. Sigmund thrust his snout toward him and made a series of ear-piercing sounds. Gort shrank back and seemed cowed. Then he bowed low and leaped - backward - back into the pack.

Sigmund turned to the three Bugaloos. "Gort talks too much. I understand you taped his speech patterns last night and learned how to nullify his vibrations."

"It wasn't hard," I.Q. said nonchalantly.

"It has been brought to my attention..." The Vibe hesitated, and he actually seemed embarrassed. He cleared his throat noisily. "There is another of you, I am told."

"That's right," Courage said before I.Q. could stop him.

"And if I'm not mistaken, he is at this moment engaged in an attempt to neutralize my efforts by playing his instrument."

The Bugaloos brightened at the news. They had hoped that somehow Harmony had been able to escape, and no matter what happened to them, they were glad for him.

Sigmund shrugged. "It's too bad. Gort was supposed to destroy that organ last night, but he botched the job. It would have been much easier if we didn't have to contend with that sort of nuisance, but..." He turned one of the knobs on his chest. "So be it. We'll have to use the full power immediately instead of proceeding in stages." He smiled apologetically at the Bugaloos. "It makes a bit of a mess, but that's the price we pay for progress."

Harmony slumped in front of the keyboard, his body bathed in perspiration. "I've done it," he gasped to himself. "The Vibes are stopped..."

"Oh no they're not," the Bluebell Flower warned.

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it in my petals. They're just getting warmed up."

"That's right," a grape chimed in.

"Our vine is sending us messages - and they're not love notes!"

Harmony jumped up. "Can you grapes tell what's going on down there?"

"Sure. Our vine has had a tendril in the roof of that cave for weeks now."

Harmony threw up his hands in exasperation. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Our job is to tell you when someone's coming, or if somebody's in danger."

"Well, what do you think is going on now?"

"When the danger came, there was nobody here to tell. Gee, you sure expect a lot from a grapevine."

"Ah!" Harmony turned away in disgust, then thought better of it. "Look," he said placidly. "Can you give me any idea what's happening in the cave now?"

"You'll hear in a minute," a grape replied.

"Less than a minute," another said.

"Just about...now."

With that a cacophony of sound suddenly assaulted the clearing: Deep booming tones, with a wailing chorus threading in and out behind them, coming from everywhere with such intensity that Harmony felt his very eyeballs jiggling. It was like a physical assault that all but paralyzed him, and through his momentary daze he was aware of tree after tree crashing to the ground around him. "I've got to stop it," he said through gritted teeth. "But how?"

How Benita Bizarre found her way through the labyrinth of inky passages to the Organ Chamber will undoubtedly always remain a mystery. Witches have a nose for the sources of trouble, and among witches Benita's nose was outstanding. To say the least.

One way or another, she and Funky found themselves at the bottom of the sloping ramp, looking into the vast cavern where Sigmund was orchestrating the destruction of the Bugaloos' clearing. The sound of the 500 Vibes' voices was like thunder, with undertones of aching sweetness.

"Why don't they do it one way or another?" Benita complained.

Funky didn't respond. He couldn't hear a word she said - and he'd never been so happy in his life.

The witch watched the awesome scene spread before her with utter composure. She was used to revolting sights, and all she was concerned with was the three Bugaloos in the middle of the circle. And the Vibe with the groovy robe. She waited a minute or two, then made up her mind. Sometimes the direct approach was the best way to get things done.

"Hi there!" she called, striding out into the chamber with a wave and a toothy smile.

Sigmund turned abruptly, his pop-eyes blinking rapidly as he regarded the unlikely apparition coming toward him. The chorus of Vibes faltered and drifted into a muted humming.

Benita moved nonchalantly through the tightly-packed mass of creatures, kicking one aside here, stepping over another there. "Pardon me...if you don't mind...just move aside there, Buster...o-o-h-h, you really are repulsive, aren't you?...move it, Jack..."

When she reached the inside of the circle, with Funky close behind her, she flipped the end of her boa in a circle and gave Sigmund the benefit of the full power of her charm. "You must be the head guy around here," she said brightly.

Sigmund backed away a few steps. "I am Sigmund the Seventh, son of Sigmund the Sick..."

"Yeah, yeah," Benita interrupted, looking around the Organ Chamber with a proprietary gaze. "Say, I hear you've got a little gizmo that can cut in on radio broadcasts. What'll ya take for it?"

"I beg your pardon," Sigmund said coldly, clearly repelled by the witch.

"Come on, come on," Benita said with a wink. "Look, everybody's got his price. Anything you want, it's yours. Name it."

Sigmund was speechless.

Benita bent over and started to pat him on the head, but couldn't quite make herself do it. "Tell you what. I've got a guy, his name is Mister Rudolph, and he can work miracles. Miracles! A couple of sessions at his salon and you'll be beautiful! Believe me." She did a little pirouette. "Living proof."

Sigmund sighed wearily. "Yes. Excuse me, but we're in the middle of something..." He started to push one of the buttons on his chest.

Benita stared. "Is that it? Is that the Sigmund Apparatus?"

The Vibe rolled his eyes helplessly. "Yes, madam, it is. Now will you please..."

"Yahoo!" the witch shrieked, and turned to Funky. "Zap 'em! It's all mine!"

The rat brought the cumbersome weapon up to his shoulder and aimed it at the ruler of the Vibes, but Sigmund faced the Stereo Zapper calmly.

"Lorenzo," he said softly.

A Vibe stepped forward quickly, its throat swelling and a thin, piercing tone issued from his mouth. Funky staggered, tried to bring the Zapper to bear again - and felt the weapon melt away in his hands.

"Vass iss dot?" he squealed, dropping the jumble of metal and electrodes to the floor.

"That is my answer to your crude weapons." Sigmund turned to I.Q. "I knew of this second-rate witch, of course, and her so-called Zapper. It uses sound, but in such an elementary way that I'm almost embarrassed to have to destroy it."

Benita hurled herself on the Vibe in a furious assault. "You toad!" she shrieked. "You zapped my Zapper! You'll pay for this! I'll tear your eyeballs out. I'll..."

Sigmund hopped lightly, almost disdainfully, aside. "Zergat," he said.

Another Vibe began to make a high-pitched sound that seemed to pierce the very walls of the chamber. Benita stiffened, became rigid as a column of stone, and slowly toppled to the floor. Funky looked at her and began to smile, just before he collapsed beside her.

Sigmund turned to the Bugaloos. "I have a Vibe for every purpose, you see. Their voices can interfere with brain waves. I can put people to sleep or...other things...with sound alone. Now. Shall we get on with our business? I'd like to see the sunrise in Tranquility Desert."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Harmony surveyed the destruction around him and shook his head sadly. "I can't fight them with just the organ," he said. "They've got too much power for me, even on full gain."

"You have to stop them!" the Bluebell Flower cried, "They're going to destroy every living thing in Tranquility Forest! Especially me!"

"I'm doing my best!" Harmony exclaimed. "If you've got any ideas you'd better let me hear them."

The plant sniffed. "Flowers don't have ideas. Only people do." It was obvious what it thought of ideas - and people.

"Better brace yourself," a grape warned.

"Now it's coming," another said sadly.

"So long, chums," a third wept.

"What are you talking about?" Harmony demanded.

"Sigmund is starting the Big Push."

"How do you know?"

The grapes wiggled and bobbed. "We heard it on the Grapevine. Remember? We have a line down there."

Harmony snapped his fingers. "Of course! He strode over to the cluster of purple orbs. "Does that thing work two ways?"

The grapes turned their heads toward each other, murmuring and frowning. Then they looked at Harmony. "Maybe," was the verdict.

Harmony was tempted to be exasperated, but he didn't have time. "If you can hear what's going on down there, then maybe we can make them hear what's happening up here," he said.

"Eavesdropping?" the Bluebell Flower asked disdainfully.

"No, no. What I want...somehow we've got to pipe my organ music down into the cavern. Can we do that through the Grapevine?"

"Possibly," a grape said slowly.

"But we don't know how," another added.

"You have to have connections," a third explained.

"Connections," Harmony repeated. He looked around the clearing - then straight at the Bluebell Flower.

"You," he said firmly.

"Me?" The plant drew back and contracted its petals.

"Yes, you," Harmony insisted. "Get yourself over to this speaker here." He showed the Bluebell Flower the speaker that was right next to the plant. "With that horn you call a bell, we ought to be able to make ourselves heard down there..."

"But, but..."

"You're the one with connections, Bluebell," Harmony went on relentlessly. "You're attached to the grapevine, aren't you? I know you are because you wanted to be able to make the announcement whenever news is coming. Now you're going to deliver the news yourself."

"But I'm a bell. Not a...a megaphone!"

"Mister Sigmund?"

The Vibe leader looked at Joy questioningly.

"Is there no way we can persuade you not to do this terrible thing?" the girl pleaded.

"Terrible thing?" Sigmund asked. "What's terrible about it?"

"But don't you see? You're destroying our beautiful forest! All the trees, the flowers, the lovely little rippling stream...everything!"

The Vibe shrugged. "It must be done. It's the only way we can live."

"But...why?" Joy gestured toward the lofty ceiling. "You prefer to live underground anyway; why do you care what it's like on the surface?"

Sigmund blinked at her, then nodded his head slowly. "You don't understand," he said almost gently. "We are a folk who have been persecuted for eons. Wherever we have found a home, we have been sought out and driven away. Now we are making a stand. We will create a desert into which no being will ever venture again, and beneath it we will have peace at last."

Joy searched for words to combat his argument, but she couldn't overcome the feeling that - from his point of view - Sigmund was almost right.

The leader of the Vibes turned to the waiting circle and made a musical gurgling noise, lifting his hands high at the same time. In response, a mighty thunder of voices literally shook the Organ Chamber. Joy and the other Bugaloos were jolted from their feet by the force of the sound, and when they tried to rise again they found that they couldn't move. The tears that fell from Joy's eyes shimmered and burst apart, shattered by the sound waves.

"It's all right, luv," I.Q. said, patting the girl awkwardly on the shoulder. "We'll go out with no regrets, eh?"

Joy shook her head forlornly. "It's not that. I'm just thinking about what's happening to Tranquility Forest. If Sigmund destroys it, I don't ever want to leave this awful cave."

Sigmund was in ecstasy as he directed the chorus of Vibes into ever more powerful sounds. The Organ Chamber itself was vibrating like a plucked guitar string, the soaring rock columns blurred by their infinitely rapid movement. The leader of the Vibes looked down to press a button in his chest, then another - and all of a sudden there was total silence in the cavern.

Sigmund looked up, clearly annoyed. "What is it?" he demanded, forgetting himself. Then he repeated the question in his gurgling voice, but no sound came from his lips the second time. He looked around him, at the

circle of Vibes with their mouths wide open, throats distended and pulsating. He clapped his hands over his ears.

Courage bounced up from the floor. "Having a bit of trouble are you?" he asked cheerfully.

"I don't...what is happening to me?" Sigmund seemed startled to hear his own words.

I.Q. rose and stood grinning over the Vibe. "Nothing's happening to you, old bean. It's just your vibrations that are a bit out of cycle." He glanced upward. "I rather thought we could count on Harmony."

Sigmund began to hop in agitated circles, punching buttons and turning knobs in a wild panic. "This can't be happening!" he shrieked. "The Sigmund Apparatus! It is all-powerful!"

I.Q. winked at Courage. "I don't know where you've been before you came here," he said to Sigmund. "But there's no such thing as 'all-powerful' in Tranquility Forest. Except, perhaps...tranquility."

The Vibe didn't appear to hear him as he continued his frantic hopping. Suddenly smoke began to curl from the complex on his chest. There was a spark, a spurt of flame, and Sigmund yowled in pain. He clapped his hands against his chest, and a wire melted in his fingers. "No!" he cried. "No, no, no!"

"I think you can stop now," the Bluebell Flower roared above the din of the organ.

Harmony looked up quickly. He was hunched over the keyboard, his fingers aching so terribly that he expected to see blood on the keys at any moment.

"I say!" the plant shouted. "Please stop!"

"What for?" Harmony yelled back.

"Because the Sigmund Apparatus just blew up!"

"You can hear even while you're sending?"

The Bluebell Flower turned aside with a show of modesty. "I'm versatile."

"With our help!" the grapes chorused.

With the utmost caution, Harmony took his hands away from the keyboard and let the organ lapse into silence. He looked up and around him. There was no sound, nothing stirring. Fallen trees were everywhere, but everything that remained standing seemed firmly rooted.

"What's going on down there?" he asked the Bluebell Flower.

The plant listened for a moment, then smiled shyly. "Thank you for saving my life," it said, almost simpering. "I'll never tease you or be cross with you again."

Harmony threw up his hands in disgust. "That's all I need: Everlasting gratitude from a bloomin' plant!"

Sigmund lay on the floor of the Organ Chamber, his bulging eyes closed and his mouth working feebly. The other Vibes hadn't moved. They seemed to have no feelings or emotions at all at the sight of their fallen leader.

Joy was bending over the Vibe leader, gently pulling smoldering bits of wire from his chest. Every once in a while, a piece of stone would flake off from the tall, slender columns and shower down among the clustered horde, but they paid no attention to it.

"How is he?" I.Q. asked indifferently.

"I think he's just fainted," Joy said. Their voices barely carried the few feet between them. It was as though the air itself had been deadened by the colossal struggle that had just been waged.

Sigmund groaned and tried to roll over. Joy put a restraining hand on his forehead - or where his forehead would have been if he'd had one. It was still far from a pleasant feeling, but the girl was more concerned for the distressed Vibe than for her own sensibilities.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Sigmund opened his eyes and blinked at the girl. "It's not a dream," he said mournfully. "The Organ Chamber is full of Bugaloos and..." He put a hand to his chest and felt the wreckage that was there. "...and the Sigmund Apparatus is...oh no! What will we do?" He flopped over and buried his face in the floor, beating his tiny hands against the rocky surface.

"Oh don't do that, please," Joy pleaded. "You don't have to be so sad."

Sigmund looked around at the girl. "Sad? I'm miserable!" And he began to wail again like a small child who's lost its most cherished toy.

Joy looked helplessly at the other Bugaloos, but they couldn't offer any advice.

"I say let's get out of here," Courage suggested.

"Not a bad idea," I.Q. agreed. "But we can't just leave this lot here." He gestured toward the 500 impassive Vibes.

"If you don't want 'em, I'll take 'em."

The Bugaloos looked around to see Benita Bizarre sitting up on the edge of the circle, fondling the nearest Vibe. "I've never seen anything quite so perfect in my life," the witch gushed. "I'm gonna take 'em all home with me."

"What do you think you're going to do with them?" Courage asked.

Benita floundered to her feet. "Listen," she said. "Anything as ugly as these creeps I can always find a use for. Anyway..." She beamed down at the nearest Vibe. "I always did have a passion for frog's legs."

Joy jumped up. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, wouldn't I?" The witch snapped over her shoulder. "Come on, Funky. The Zapper...oh-oh..."

"That's right," Courage said, poking the witch on her bony shoulder. "You've got no power over us now, nor over these poor creatures. Why don't you just go back to your neon turntable and leave us alone?"

"Hey, wait a minute fellas," Benita protested with a phony smile. "I just want to...you know. I mean, I was helping to save Tranquility Forest, right? Right Funky?"

The rat was reclining on the floor, regarding the Vibes with sheer delight. They were even uglier than he was. "Vass ist?" he asked languidly.

"I said...ah-h...never mind. Come on. Let's get outa this clammy cave."

He had the notes right this time. It was almost automatic with him. Harmony plucked the string and watched as the rock swung open. He stepped down into the hole, carrying his light before him - and nearly ran into a frightening apparition.

"Who's that?" he cried.

"Get outa the way," the voice of Benita Bizarre rasped. Harmony stepped aside and watched with amazement as the witch and Funky walked glumly past him out into the night. They didn't give him a second glance, and he wondered what had happened to them. There were some things the Grapevine-Bluebell Flower hadn't bothered to tell him.

It was easy now that he had taken the route once before. Third passage down on the right, then the fork to the left. Across the bridge of stone (no point in imagining what might be down there if he should happen to fall off), up the natural steps and then down on the other side, and after a few more twists and turns he was at the sloping ramp that led into the Organ Chamber. Harmony didn't know what he expected to find, but he wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him.

The Vibes remained in their silent circle, and in the middle of it Joy was sitting on the floor, cradling the head of Sigmund. Even from where he stood, Harmony could see that the Vibe leader was sobbing.

"I say," he called, stepping over the backs of the Vibes. "What's happening here?"

Joy looked up. "Poor Sigmund," she said. "We've ruined his last hope. The Vibes have nowhere else to go now, and the Sigmund Apparatus is destroyed."

Harmony found it difficult to sympathize, but he knew something that the other Bugaloos didn't. "Maybe it's not so hopeless after all," he said casually.

"But don't you see?" Joy asked, gesturing at the blubbing Vibe. "These poor creatures have nothing now. What can they do? Where can they live?"

"What's wrong with right here?" Harmony suggested.

"They can't! Even now the rocks are crumbling around them since the Sigmund Apparatus was destroyed."

Harmony glanced upward with an appraising eye. "Oh, a few of those stone organ pipes are falling apart, but I think the cave will hold up." He smiled and winked at I.Q.

"What are you up to?" I.Q. demanded.

"Well...on my way back here I was listening to my transistor. Let me see if I can get anything down here." He pulled the little radio from his pocket and held it to his ear, listened for a moment and nodded with satisfaction.

"What on earth are you doing?" Joy asked.

"Just tuning in Peter Platter," Harmony replied with wide-eyed innocence. "Here, grab an earful."

Joy took the radio and listened for a moment, then turned the volume up full.

"...all your requests for the Cosmic Chorus are gonna be answered, I keep tellin' all you phone freaks out there. It's a new, new new GROUP! And when they finish cuttin' their next disc, you're gonna be hearin' 'em on KOOK exclusively! Take my word for it, kids and cats. That music you heard yesterday morning is the real McCoy, the zingiest! The new sound you've all been waitin' for. Now did Ol' Peter Platter ever lie to you? Did I ever promise you anything you didn't get? The Cosmic Chorus is yours folks. Just don't keep tyin' up the phone lines, huh? I mean, you know, like the Cosmic Chorus is tryin' to get through to me right now, you dig?...I hope..."

Joy turned the volume down and looked down at Sigmund with a joyous smile. "Oh! Isn't that wonderful!"

"Wonderful?" the Vibe repeated dubiously.

"Of course! Don't you see?"

Sigmund shook his head. "You are confusing me."

"But...oh. Perhaps you don't understand." She gestured at the radio. "You heard Peter Platter?"

"Naturally. Something about a...ugh...Cosmic Chorus."

"Well, that's you! You and your five hundred Vibes!"

"I? We?"

"Of course! The music you make is absolutely breathtaking, you know, and everyone wants to hear more!"

Sigmund struggled to his feet. His eyes were blinking rapidly, but there was nothing menacing about him now. He simply looked confused. "But...but, our voices are not for the purpose of entertainment," he said with a touch of scorn. "They are for building, for altering, for destruction...oh my!" He touched his chest, remembering.

"That may be the way you look at it," Joy reasoned, "but now that's no longer the case. Sigmund?" she said in persuasive tones.

The Vibe looked at her, and for a fleeting instant he appeared to be touched by the girl's obvious compassion. "Yes?" he rumbled.

"You've said that everywhere you've gone you've been...well, not welcome?"

The Vibe lowered his eyelids. "Quite true."

"And so you've had to make your own environment, so to speak." The girl looked around the cavern. "There's really nothing wrong with living underground. This is quite charming. But it's not necessary to destroy everything on the surface above you...is it?"

Sigmund drew himself up. "It has been necessary. Other people will not let us live the way we must."

"We will."

"I beg your pardon?"

Joy looked around at the other Bugaloos, who were all smiling their approval. "I say we will," she said to Sigmund. "You can live the way you want to, and we'll live the way we do. There's not any real conflict, after all."

Sigmund's mouth worked silently for a moment before he found the words he was groping for. "Do you mean...you don't mind? Our being here, I mean?"

Joy spread her hands. "Why should we?"

The Vibe raised his little hands, spreading his robe, then dropped them again. "But...we are builders, changers, des...well, I don't suppose..."

Joy touched Sigmund gently on the head. "I'm terribly sorry about your Sigmund Apparatus. If there had been any other way, Harmony wouldn't have destroyed it. But now that it's gone, you can use those marvelous voices for good things." She held up the radio. "Think of all the people you can make happy with your super music!"

Sigmund looked at the transistor with a thoughtful expression - then beamed. "Make people happy! What an original idea! With..." He swung his arm in an all-encompassing circle. "With five hundred Vibes! We'll be recording stars, then?" he asked eagerly.

"You can't miss. And we'll help you in any way we can," Joy assured him.

Sigmund took a deep breath and bared all his fearsome teeth in a delightful smile. "A star! Me, Sigmund the Seventh! And...uh-h...Subjects," he added. The Vibe looked up at Joy. "You can arrange personal appearances, of course? I'll want to meet my fans. It's the only way to keep in touch with their tastes, I understand." He glanced down critically at his robe and vest. "And perhaps I should adopt a...a groovier mode of dressing..."

Joy looked at the others with a helpless shrug, and Harmony grinned at her. After all, there was no such thing as a perfect solution, was there?

The End