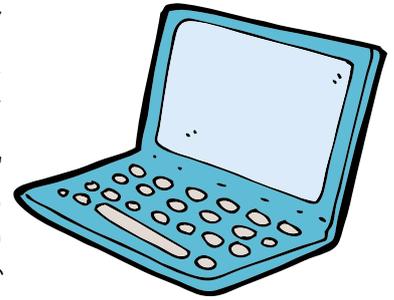


LEVEL UP

Breathing a sigh of relief, I closed the final book and clicked my pen. "Finally finished!" I mumbled to myself. I flipped open my laptop screen, wanting to check my emails one last time before bed. 11.17pm. The red digits of my alarm clock flashed at me urging me to close my eyes. An email pinged into my inbox, 'Something to brighten up your marking!'. I clicked the link and waited impatiently as the blue bar crept to its finish line to show the page was fully loaded. 98%. 99%...a blinding flash of light. The screen went black.



Creak..Crack! My body came to life with a jolt. With widened eyes I tried to make sense of my surroundings. Emerald leaves tickled my skin. A pungent scent snuck up my nostrils and made my eyes water. From above me, the sun's rays danced on my pale skin sneaking between the arms of the tall trees. Another creak..followed by a crack! Whatever had been holding me up suddenly gave way, sending me plummeting downwards. Flailing my arms frantically, I tried to grab onto something. Anything! Just then my hands managed to grasp a long rope that snaked down the side of the tree trunk. My freefalling was interrupted as the rope fully extended. My body buckled as the rope pulled taut, leaving me dangling like a spider on a web. I held on as tightly as I could, panting for breath. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a second rope. As I reached out for it, a shadowy figure scuttled down from above, stopping right in front of my face.

"Name. Now!" demanded the stranger, as I tried to make sense of her feral appearance. Wide brown eyes. Matted hair, which looked as though it hadn't been washed in years. Clothes made of animal skins and tied together with rope. Who was this person and where on earth was I?

An impatient cough drew me out of my thoughts and I suddenly realised I hadn't spoken yet. I croaked out my name and was told to follow. Not really having any other option, I complied. The jungle was hot and damp, with a sweet smell hanging in the air that reminded me of passion fruit. Below my feet, the leaves squelched and the bushes to my right and left seemed to be alive with activity, rustling and humming to themselves. On the path up ahead I could see something floating in the air, it bounced up and down and as we approached. I squinted my eyes to try to make sense of it.

With my heart beating hard in my chest, I managed to splutter out the words, "How can this be happening?!" My new guide simply glanced back at me and then broke into a run towards the jumping creature, who was so familiar to me. She soared high into

LEVEL UP

With my heart beating hard in my chest, I managed to splutter out the words, "How can this be happening?!" My new guide simply glanced back at me and then broke into a run towards the jumping creature, who was so familiar to me. She soared high into the sky, landing on the creature's back. Momentarily stunned, the creature stood still. Breaking into a spin, the jungle woman moved closer again to the turtle, collided with him and he disappeared without a trace. At that very moment, the well-known phrase sounded; "One up! You've gained a life!". There was no other explanation for it; I was in... a video game!

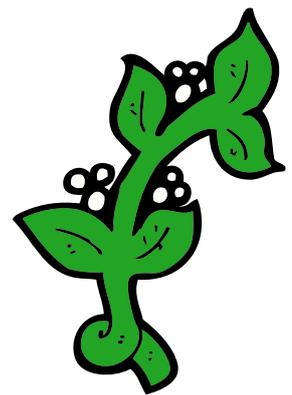


"Me, Jane. We collect ten bananas, we get next level." The jungle woman now had a name and she seemed to have taken me onto her team. Becoming increasingly amazed by the situation, whilst also being terrified, I quickened my pace to keep up and kept my eyes peeled for bananas.

They weren't easy to find in the midst of the dense forest, however, their bright colour did make them stand out somewhat. When I found one Jane gave me an encouraging pat on the back, even though she had found five so far. Two of the bananas had to be prized out of the hands of some angry monkeys, who Jane fought off in a similar fashion to which she'd gotten rid of the turtle.

By the time we had collected nine bananas I was feeling confident in my abilities to be a video game character. I had managed to keep hold of all my lives and made what seemed like a perilous trek through a rainforest, which appeared to be trying to kill me. But as with any good game, the last task did not come easily...

Swinging vine to vine we dodged the vicious plants. I used my parkour skills to escape the biting jaws, focused on my pursuit to get the last banana. "Watch out left!" Jane yelled to me as a plant caught me by surprise, nipping my t-shirt and ripping a chunk out of the back of it. I ducked. I dived. I darted. Finally I squeezed my eyes tightly together and vaulted towards the centre of the maze. My hand grazed against something but my body never landed. Everything went black.



A cold shiver rattled through my body. I blinked unsurely as I tried to make sense of my surroundings once again. Beep! 11:18. The red digits of the clock flashed at me, almost seeming to wink this time. Just as I started to convince myself that I'd fallen asleep and dreamt the whole thing, I caught the unmistakable glimpse of the yellow fruit in my kitchen...