

**Talk About It**

Imagine what it would be like to be hunted and in hiding.

# Higher Animals

Short Story by Jay Henderson


Skye's heart fluttered like a bird in a cage—a wild bird, only moments trapped. They were out to get her, no doubt about that, and they always seemed to get what they wanted.

“Just about got you covered, Skye,” wheezed Kevin, nearly out of breath from the chase.

“Hurry. Get yourself out of sight, too,” Skye coaxed. She was amazed that Kevin had stuck with her, knowing how dangerous it had become. He was being uncommonly brave, offering to cover her first and then look after himself. She felt him toss a few last handfuls of poplar leaves over top of her. Then he made rustling noises burrowing into a separate pile they had prepared together. Skye inhaled the musky smell of decaying leaves, her nose pressed sideways against the cold and spongy forest floor. She prayed their tormentors would pass without detecting her red hair through the kaleidoscope of autumn colours. Otherwise she would end up dead and decaying too, if she weren't hidden well enough.

Neither said a word from then on. Everything was so quiet and still, Skye allowed herself the luxury of thinking that she and Kevin might have outsmarted their pursuers. Unfortunately, that possibility rapidly dissolved as the howls of the Hasher twins once again rang through the chill air.





It was clear that the twins had come over the ridge and were bearing down upon the hiding spot. One of them came crashing through the bush nearby, sending shock waves into the earth. The side of Skye's face tingled as it picked up the vibrations. Was it Katie or Marla? Strange that one of them was running ahead of the other. The Hasher twins were weird; fourteen years old and still as inseparable as honey on toast.

Whoever had run ahead was getting closer. Closer and closer. "We're gonna eat you two for breakfast!" she screamed. It had to be Katie, Skye thought, judging by the raspy voice.

"Pack rats!" added Marla, catching up. Her yelp was unmistakable.

"Come on, you silly squirrels, show your faces!" bellowed a third voice: a boy's.

Oh no, not that new guy! worried Skye. Not fair; not fair at all. We're dead meat! We might have had a chance against the twins, but from what I've heard, this—what's his name—Todd, is an animal. They say he loves to see fear in his victim's eyes before he does them in.


Skye believed her heart would soon give her away. It was thump-thumping against her rib cage. One of them is bound to run right over us, she thought; there'll be a scream, and we'll be at their mercy. I know what they're like. I've seen Katie and Marla operate back at school. They never show sympathy for anybody smaller or weaker than themselves.

Rustling sounds. Someone was almost on top of her! Then a *craaack!* right next to Skye's head. The sound shot into her ear, but she remained frozen. She hoped Kevin was staying still, holding his breath also.

All fell silent. Her heart, starved for oxygen, slowed to the point where she was afraid it might stop breathing altogether. The world seemed locked in a freeze-frame. Skye expected an arm to thrust through the leaves any second and grab her by the neck. But it wasn't a hand she felt.

Something warm was making its way up her pant leg, rubbing its hairy body against the inside of her calf. It scurried a few centimetres, stopped, scurried and stopped, scurried and stopped. Gross me out, it's a mouse! she panicked.





It reached her knee. God, how she wished she had worn tight-fitting pants; how she wanted to scream—jump up—shake her leg—tear off her baggy jeans—whatever it might take to get the stupid thing out of there! But Skye couldn't. No way! Her life was more important than some ratty rodent using her pant leg as a hiding hollow.

Skye was determined to remain frozen in place, no matter where the little intruder went next—almost—but she absolutely had to let the air out of her lungs. Pursing her lips, she let it out ever so slowly, until she began to grow faint. Then she drew it in again like sucking yogurt through a narrow straw. Nothing mattered but her breathing, certainly not a harmless mouse, she told herself with a shiver. But, she began to wonder, was her breathing controlled enough, or was Katie standing there glaring down at the mound of browns and yellows covering her, watching it rise and fall like a blacksmith's bellows? Surely the thin layer of leaves wouldn't be enough of a covering to save her from the three beasts of Redmond Junior High.

Then the mouse started creeping its way up her thigh, heading for higher ground.

"Which way do you think the pond scum went, you guys?" Katie whispered. The others were close, too. Real close.

"I dunno. When they slipped over the ridge, I thought they were headed toward this big pine..." said Todd. "But now I'm not so sure."

"You hear that?" squealed Marla. "I bet they're escaping to the river, like all vermin when they're up against it." There were rustling sounds in the distance. The three immediately struck off.

Thwick! Katie's foot clipped the heel of Skye's boot as she sped off.

Oh God, no! Skye thought, tensing from temple to heel. The muscles in her neck, back and legs ached like they were being pulled together by stretchable bands running through her body. Even the mouse, who had managed to scale her thigh, stopped stone still. Thankfully, the boots continued to pound the earth, and the vibrations were rapidly diminishing in force. She relaxed, imagining the ends of three taut elastic bands in her body slowly coming together at the centre.



Elastic. The mouse was almost up to her panty line—definitely going too far! But was it safe to jump up yet? Were they far enough away? It was obvious that Kevin hadn't made a move yet. Reminding herself how serious the consequences of discovery would be, Skye decided to stay put a little longer. But the mouse had better not cross the elastic. If it moved, she moved!

Skye forced her mind, once again, to refocus. She thought it so unfair. The others had two obvious advantages: their superior strength and greater speed, compounded by the fact that they were ganging up. She knew it wouldn't matter to the twins that she wanted nothing from them, found it impossible to hate them.

Then Skye remembered what had happened to her two friends, Tracy and Twig. They would never run away again. Katie and Marla got them good. Skye had stayed hidden, watching from a safe distance as the twins picked them off one after the other. There had been no choice but to hide—*no* choice but to hide.

Skye's mind reeled as the mouse darted across the elastic and shot halfway up her right cheek where it lay down, trembling. It tickled. Skye twitched her cheek. The mouse reacted quickly, making a break for it down the back of her leg and out the end of the pant tunnel, scratching her with its tiny claws all the way.

"Kevin. Kevin, let's move it!" Skye commanded. She leapt to her feet. Immediately hunching back down, she checked all around. "They're bound to backtrack and sniff us out if we stay put."



"Oh this is great! They'll never find us here, not a chance. How'd you spot it?" Kevin asked, huddled against the wall of a small cave, high up on the riverbank.

"Caught a glimpse of it out the corner of my eye. Probably an old washout. Maybe a grizzly dug into it for a den." Skye sat close to the entrance, scanning what she could see of the riverbank.

"What!" blurted Kevin. "Grizzly?"

"Shhhhhh! Keep it down." That waterfall up the way would cover some noises, but it was better to be safe. Even if he had shown some courage earlier, Kevin was still no Robin Hood. She was pleased to have his companionship, though.



“Sorry,” he whispered. “But if some smelly old sack of a bear once used this as a home and comes back to claim it, we’re gonna be nothing but lunch.”

“Kevin, I think I hear something.”

“It’s the bear! It’s hibernating time again and we’re...”

“Shhh!” Skye scolded, whispering, “don’t say another word.”

They both sat absolutely still, once again holding their breaths. Sure enough, there were noises—and soon, voices.

“Look, there’re fresh tracks here!” howled Todd.

“Yep, that’s one of them all right,” spoke Katie, sounding as always like someone had rubbed the inside of her voice-box with sandpaper.

“C’mon, c’mon, they gotta be hiding right around here somewhere,” yelped Marla. “Let’s find ’em and toast ’em!” Skye pictured Marla with a string of drool running out the corner of her crooked mouth. She would be hanging at Katie’s shoulder.

“Not so fast,” Katie said. “There are more tracks heading further upstream. See? They’ve gone up past the waterfall into the pines.”


“I think you’re right,” replied Todd. “Let’s go, you guys. We have to put those two away once and for all!” The sounds of their huffs and grunts quickly faded away.

Skye, letting the air out of her lungs and gasping for more, suddenly found herself wrapped up in Kevin’s arms. He, too, was struggling to get his breathing back to normal, but obviously couldn’t contain his joy at having dodged the grim reaper again. “Ha! What a bunch of idiots,” he said, “they couldn’t track an elephant across a field of chocolate pudding.”

Then he laughed. Skye laughed, too. They laughed and hugged, and rocked and laughed and held each other tightly in the middle of the little cave, right where the grizzly had probably rested its massive head.

All of a sudden, a head appeared in the entranceway. “Ewwww, you two look pretty cozy.” Reaching in, Katie grabbed Skye by the collar of her coat and plucked her out. Kevin stepped out peacefully, not looking anyone in the eye, his face flushed and turning redder by the second.





Katie faced Skye head on, staring her down. “Now then, I think you’ve got something I want!” Suddenly her right arm shot forward, toward Skye’s middle. Twisting her fist around as she thrust it ahead, Katie opened it palm up and ordered, “Put it there.”

Skye immediately reached for the metal loop attached to her belt. She only had one life tag left, and was certain that Katie knew it. Disconnecting the loop from her belt, she slid off the piece of leather with the word SQUIRREL stamped into it, and placed it in Katie’s hand.

“You are officially dead meat!” squealed Marla. “I believe the graveyard is up that way.” Drooling more than she normally did, Marla pointed toward the hill where the Animal Game had started over an hour ago.

“So sorry—aren’t we girls?” said Todd, his eyes gleaming like those of a wolf ready for the kill. Yanking Kevin’s last life tag from his belt, Todd took off in pursuit of two orange-shirted upper herbivores who were making a break for the pines. Katie and Marla struck off as well.

As Skye and Kevin trudged toward the Animal Graveyard to twiddle their thumbs until the end of the game, Kevin took hold of Skye’s hand, saying, “Next time, let’s ask to be carnivores or upper omnivores maybe. We could be the grizzlies.”

“Higher animals, eh? Grizzlies could be all right, I guess,” Skye mused, squeezing Kevin’s hand tightly. A broad smile floated across her face before she added, “How’s your bear hug, Kevin?”

## Reflecting

**Making Inferences:** What inferences did you make about the characters as you read? What ideas or conclusions did your inferences help you form?

**Metacognition:** How does imagining how the characters feel engage you in the story?

**Critical Thinking:** What did you think the title “Higher Animals” meant when you began reading? What do you think the title means now?