Name: _____ Date: _____

Four Days in Sienna Canyon

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 2501 words

"Come on, map boy," Uncle Rudy called back. "Hup, hup." Mateo Ibarra did not like to be hurried, and by the second morning of the trip his uncle had hurried him eleven times. Uncle Rudy was a big, loud, cheerful man who believed that daylight was money and that anyone who was not walking was spending it. Mateo believed that a slot canyon was the most interesting place he had ever been, and that nobody ought to pass through it without looking. The walls of Sienna Canyon rose a hundred feet on either side, glowing orange and rose and gold, so narrow in places that he could touch both of them with his elbows, and far above them the sky was a long blue ribbon.

At noon, the four of them reached a wide place in the canyon where the walls opened into a sandy room about the size of a school gym. Uncle Rudy called it the Ballroom. He dropped his pack in the sand, and so did his friends, Pilar and Dov, and they began unwrapping sandwiches. Mateo kept his pack on a little longer. High on the wall behind them, a stripe of sunlight had slid into a rounded hollow in the rock and was lighting the stone from the inside, like a lamp in a shell, and he had to see it from the ledge. He took his water bottle, which was about half full, and his phone, and he scrambled thirty feet up the sloping rock.

On the ledge, he took the picture, and it was the best picture he had ever taken. Then he turned around to check the sky, which he always did because his mother had asked him to, and overhead it was perfectly blue. But far to the east, beyond the rim, a gray wall stood on the horizon, with a smudge of rain trailing beneath it like a dirty curtain. Uncle Rudy had said that it was in the next county. Mateo had read, in the guidebook that he had memorized on the drive, that in a slot canyon the sky overhead tells you nothing, because rain falls miles away and the water comes down the canyon to find you.

The sound came first. At the start it was hardly a sound at all, only a low shiver in the rock under his hands, like a truck passing on a distant road. Then it grew into a long, hollow roar, and he saw Uncle Rudy lift his head from his sandwich. "Up!" Uncle Rudy shouted. "Everybody up, up, up!" They ran for a slanting shelf at the far end of the Ballroom. Mateo stayed where he was, on the ledge, thirty feet above the sand, because there was no time to be anywhere else, and around the bend of the canyon a wall of brown water, carrying whole trees, came pouring in.

It took less than a minute to fill the Ballroom. The water was the color of chocolate milk, and it was thick with sticks and sand and small boulders that knocked together under the surface with a sound like bowling. It swept the packs off the sand, and the sandwiches, and Dov's hat, and it climbed the walls in a heaving brown curl until it was slapping at the foot of Mateo's

ledge, ten feet below him. He pressed himself flat against the rock. Across the Ballroom, on the far shelf, he could see Uncle Rudy's red shirt, with Pilar and Dov crouched beside him, and Uncle Rudy's mouth wide open, shouting something that the water swallowed completely.

The flood lasted an hour. Then it began to shrink, and by the middle of the afternoon the Ballroom was a trough of wet red mud, with a new wall of logs and boulders heaped across the middle of it like a dam built by a giant. On one side of the dam, on the far shelf, stood Uncle Rudy. On the other, high on his ledge, stood Mateo. Between them lay a pool of thick brown water, as deep as a house, and the canyon walls on either side were smooth as glass. "Mateo!" Uncle Rudy's voice came ringing across the gap. "Stay where you are! I'm getting help, and I am coming back! Do you hear me? I am not leaving you!"

Mateo took inventory, sitting on the ledge with his back to the wall. He had a water bottle with about a quarter left in it. He had a phone, at sixty-one percent with no signal, which he switched to airplane mode, because that makes a battery last. He had a folded topographic map, sealed in a freezer bag in his thigh pocket, because he did not trust packs. He had a whistle on the zipper of the jacket tied around his waist, a single rock-climbing glove that Uncle Rudy had lent him for the scrambles, and, in a little foil packet that his uncle had insisted he carry on his body, an emergency blanket. Then he looked up at the wall, and he stopped.

About eight feet above his ledge, a line of twigs and grass ran along the wall, jammed into every crack and as straight as a pencil mark. Mateo knew what it was. It was a high-water line, left by some other flood in some other year, and it meant that the ledge he was sitting on would be underwater one day, if the canyon wanted it to be. He sat very still, with his heart going hard. The map was in his hand. He spread it across his knee and did what he always did when he was frightened, which was to read it slowly, one line at a time, from the bottom edge to the top.

The map showed the canyon as a thin, wiggling blue line, with brown contour lines crowded close on both sides, and wherever the blue line crossed a short row of tick marks, it said FALLS. There were two of them between the Ballroom and the trailhead, and a third that was marked with a number, thirty-five feet. Going out, he thought, was not an option. He could not climb down thirty-five feet of wet rock, and even if he could, the canyon would be full of mud and water for days. But a quarter of a mile back up the canyon, the contour lines opened around a small flat patch, and beside it, in tiny letters, someone had printed BENCH.

He did not sleep. The night in the canyon was cold, a dry, still, silent cold that came down out of the sky and into his bones, and he wrapped himself in the emergency blanket until it crackled like a bag of chips. He stared up at the strip of stars, more than he had ever seen in his life, and at some point, far off in the dark, he heard a voice, a long way away, faint and thin, calling something that sounded like his own name. He stood up on the ledge and blew

three blasts on the whistle, and then three more. Nobody answered, so he sat down again and decided that he would climb at first light, before the heat.

The way was not far, but it took Mateo three hours. He did it the way he did everything, slowly, testing every hold before he trusted it, and after a careful look at the sky he walked the quarter mile up the canyon, along the wall, on the crust of drying mud. He worked up a sloping slab of rock, pressing his palms flat, with the climbing glove on his right hand where the stone was roughest. Uncle Rudy had a saying about this, the only one of his sayings that Mateo had ever agreed with: ration your sweat, not your water. By ten o'clock he was on the Bench, a flat shelf of red stone as large as a classroom, well above the old high-water line.

It was already hot, because the sun had come over the wall, and he dragged himself into the long, narrow shade at the back of the shelf, beneath an overhanging roof of rock, and lay there with his cheek against the cool stone. He drank two small swallows of what remained in the bottle and put the cap back on, though his lips felt dry and his head had started to ache, dully, like a hand pressing on his forehead. A big black bird, bigger than any crow, landed on the edge of the Bench and looked at him with one bright eye, and it croaked, as though it had been waiting for him to arrive.

The bird was a raven, and it was back the next morning at the same hour, with the sun just topping the wall. Mateo's headache now throbbed behind his eyes, and the bottle was empty, and he had begun to talk to the raven out of loneliness, because it was there. "You're going somewhere," he said. "Every day, the same place." The raven flew along the wall to a spot about forty feet from the end of the shelf, where it landed and walked up and down on the rock, and he saw that the stone there was dark with damp.

Mateo got up slowly, because his head swam when he moved fast, and crossed the Bench to the damp place. There, in a crack in the red wall, a patch of green hung like a small garden. It was ferns, delicate and bright, with tiny round leaflets, and a few scarlet flowers growing among them, and below it a thread of water no thicker than a pencil lead ran down the rock and dripped into a hollow no bigger than a cereal bowl. He fell to his knees, because it was the first living green he had seen for two days. His uncle had once told him that ferns like these never grow where there is no water, and he had not believed it, but he believed it now.

The water came slowly, a drop at a time, and it took almost twenty minutes to fill the hollow. It was cold, and it tasted of stone, and he let it settle and strained it through the corner of his shirt, and then he drank a mouthful, and then he waited, because he knew that if he gulped it, he would only be sick. He filled the water bottle drop by drop, and although he did not know whether the water was safe, he knew that it was the only water for ten miles, and that a stomachache was a thing he could survive. By the end of the afternoon, his head had stopped pounding, and he could think again.

He thought about the signal. A person could not be seen in a slot canyon from the air,

because the walls were too deep and too narrow, but the Bench was a wide, open shelf, and it could be seen from the rim, and from a helicopter. That much the map had taught him, so on the third afternoon, when the sun had slid around and the rock had cooled, he spread the emergency blanket on the flattest part of the Bench, shiny side up, and weighted its corners with stones. Around it, he laid out three piles of rocks in a triangle, because three of anything is a sign for help. Then he sat in the shade and watched the sky.

Evening came, and with it, from very far away, a voice again. It was Uncle Rudy's, rough and enormous and thinned by distance, calling his name from somewhere along the rim, a long way above, over and over, so that the name seemed to ring down the walls like a bell. Mateo stood up and blew the whistle in threes until his lips were numb, but the canyon swallowed the sounds, and nobody answered. He sat down on the stone, and as the stars began to appear and his uncle called once more, he decided to believe that he had been heard.

On the fourth morning, he was woken by a thudding in the sky. It was so low and steady that, at first, he thought it was his own heartbeat. Then it grew louder, until it rattled the little stones on the Bench, and Mateo scrambled out from under the overhang and into the open, with the blanket's corner in one hand, as a helicopter slid over the rim of the canyon, small and red against the blue. It was flying along the slot, and it was flying away, and he ran to the edge of the Bench and waved the blanket over his head, and the silver sheet caught the sun, and threw a bright spark across the sky.

The helicopter flew on down the canyon, out of sight, and the sound faded, and for a long time Mateo stood where he was, with the blanket hanging from his hand. He told himself that he was not going to cry. He had been careful for four days, and had read the map, and the wall, and the weather, and the raven, and had done every right thing, slowly, one at a time, and yet it was gone. Then, far down the canyon, the thudding began again, and grew, and the red helicopter swung around the bend and came back toward him, slow and low, and stopped in the air in front of the Bench.

A woman in a green uniform came down on a long cable, spinning slowly, and stepped onto the rock with her boots planted wide. She unclipped herself and took off her helmet, and Mateo saw a square, brown, wind-chapped face. "Mateo Ibarra?" she said. "Ranger Teague. Your uncle has been on that rim for three days. He is going to be extremely loud when he sees you." She looked at the blanket, and at the triangle of stones, and at the green fern in the wall, and her eyebrows went up. "You stayed where we could find you," she said, and handed him a bottle of water. "Whose idea was the blanket?"

She checked his lips, and his eyes, and the scrape on his palm, and asked how his stomach was, and when he said that it was not great, she said that it would not be, and that it would pass. Then she began to clip a harness around his waist and reached for the cable and said that they should go, and Mateo took one last look at the Bench. In the slot beyond it, a stripe

of morning sunlight had slid into a round hollow in the rock, and it was lighting the stone from inside, like a lamp in a shell. He took out the phone. It was at nine percent. "Just a second," he said. Ranger Teague looked at the sky, and at him, and waited.

Questions

1. Why did Mateo climb up to the ledge?

A. To eat his sandwich
B. To photograph the sunlight in a hollow of the rock
C. To get away from the flood

2. What did the line of twigs and grass high on the wall tell Mateo?

A. Water had reached that high in an earlier flood, so his ledge was not safe
B. Birds had built nests there
C. The canyon was safe to cross

3. Why did Mateo decide that going out of the canyon was not an option?

A. He had lost his map
B. He was afraid of the dark
C. The map showed waterfalls he could not climb down, one of them thirty-five feet

4. In the story, to ration something means to

A. throw it away
B. make it last by using only a little
C. give it to a friend

5. What led Mateo to the water?

A. A sound of dripping from the rim
B. His uncle's shouting
C. A raven that walked to the damp rock, and the ferns that grow only where there is water

6. Why did Mateo build a triangle of rocks around the blanket?

A. Three of anything is a sign for help
B. It kept the blanket from blowing away
C. It made a shelter

Words to know

ledge: narrow rock shelf
inventory: list of items
contour: height line
ration: use sparingly
overhang: jutting rock

Answer key: Four Days in Sienna Canyon

1. B. To photograph the sunlight in a hollow of the rock
2. A. Water had reached that high in an earlier flood, so his ledge was not safe
3. C. The map showed waterfalls he could not climb down, one of them thirty-five feet
4. B. make it last by using only a little
5. C. A raven that walked to the damp rock, and the ferns that grow only where there is water
6. A. Three of anything is a sign for help