

# THE RIDDLE OF THE PLAYGROUND CAVE

## ACTIVITY 7

It was a bunch of young kids who found the cave under the school playground. They'd been dumping old soft drink cans and gum wrappers out there for so long, I guess the weight of all that litter just caved the playground in. Underneath there were caverns, miles of caverns. That's why they called on me, Arianna Bones, detective and mystery buster, to explore the caves. Marcus and I came with flashlights and waterproof boots. Then down we went. If we'd known what was waiting for us down there, I think we'd have stayed above ground and never gone near a cave again for the rest of our lives.

Have you ever crept through pitch-black caves before? It's not a walk in the park, let me tell you. It's so quiet. It's like the above ground world has forgotten about you.

"It's as if you could be down here forever and no one will ever come looking for you," said Marcus.

"Don't talk that way, Marcus," I replied. "You're freaking me out!"



That's when we saw it—a light, a sort of pulsing green light. It made me think of radiation or something from outer space. It was coming from a big boulder. The huge rock had five columns etched on it. Each column had a symbol near the top.

"Arianna," whispered Marcus, "I think we've seen enough. Let's get out of here. Please!"

"Just give me a minute," I replied. "I think it might be a puzzle or a code." I reached out to touch the strange alien object.

That's when it happened. There was a booming crash, like a whole bunch of elephants sitting down at once, and the flashlights went dead. I spun to my right but there was no one there. Just a bare rock wall. And Marcus was trapped behind it.

"Hey, what happened? I'm stuck and I think I cut myself. Arianna, get me out of here!"

"Calm down, Marcus," I shouted back. "I'll get you out, but you need to save your oxygen."

I didn't think there was much chance of Marcus calming down without a knock on the head, so I started checking out the signs on the boulder. There had to be a clue. First thing I realized was the giant rock changed when I touched it: my fingertip left a sort of glowing line behind.

"You can draw on it," I whispered. "But draw what?"

THE RIDDLE OF THE PLAYGROUND CAVE (CONTINUED)  
ACTIVITY 7



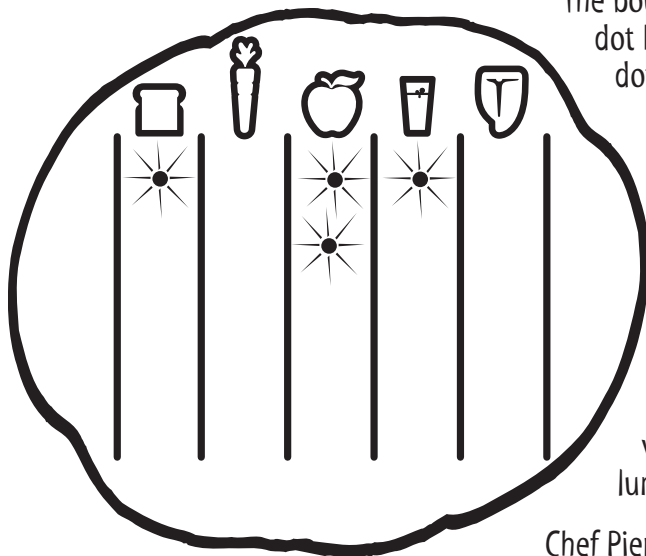
Then I noticed something. The pattern on the boulder looked so familiar, but why? Where had I seen that shape and those markings before? I racked my brain. Then it dawned on me! The enormous rock looked like the food chart we studied in school.

"Marcus," I called, "I think whoever or whatever put this here did it as a test. If we can show we understand the Five Food Groups, it might let us out. Let me try this—"

Trembling, I traced my finger on the smooth side of the rock, drawing a bowl in wobbly glowing green lines. Then I dotted inside it. It was meant to be my breakfast that morning—cereal with fruit and milk. But would this boulder understand about human food? I concentrated, calling back to my mind the crunch of the cereal, the coldness of the milk, the sweetness of fresh strawberries, and the juiciness of sliced peaches. . .

"Arianna, what's going on?" called Marcus from somewhere behind the wall.

The boulder was glowing brighter now, especially on the left where a bright dot had appeared. In the middle column were two dots. There was also a dot in the fourth column.



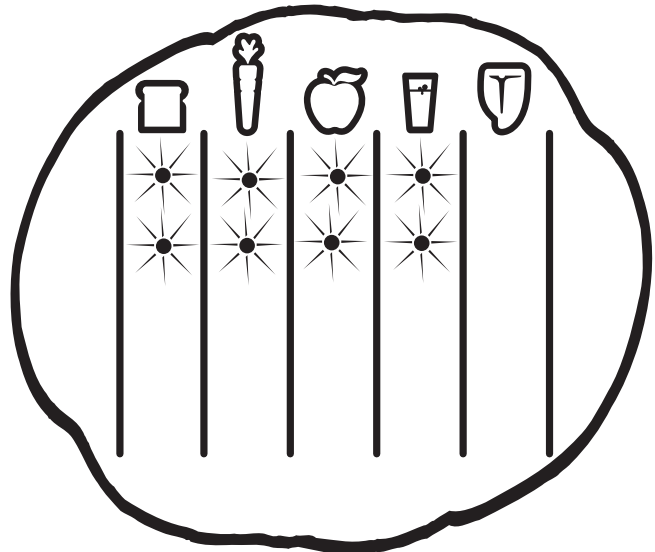
My mind raced. "That's grain, for the cereal, two fruits and some milk. Marcus, are you okay?"

Marcus's voice sounded stronger: "A bit better," he called. "I feel a scab forming where I cut my arm, but it's too dark to see much!"

The Grain Group was giving him energy from carbohydrates. The Fruit Group was giving him vitamin C to help heal his cut. Time to try something else. Something to help him see in the dark—vegetables ought to do the trick. I cast my mind back to my lunch. . . what was it? Then I remembered—

Chef Pierre's amazing pasta salad.

Lots of squiggles would stand for the tube-shaped pasta. Little boxes stood for chopped tomatoes. Little trees stood for broccoli. Meanwhile, I focused on the taste of the mozzarella cheese. . . mmm-mmmm! More dots appeared on the face of the glowing boulder: now there were two dots each in the first four columns. The light was getting brighter.



THE RIDDLE OF THE PLAYGROUND CAVE (CONTINUED)  
ACTIVITY 7



"Marcus! Talk to me! What's happening?"

"I can see a bit better," he called back, "and my strength's coming back. Keep going—but quickly!"

Great! My hunch was on track. The vegetables were helping him see better in that dark chamber. Now he needed something for his muscles.

"Marcus, this should make you stronger. Remember lunch today? Remember what you ordered? Well, I want you to focus on that. I want you to imagine it. Concentrate!"

Marcus had eaten his favorite: chicken stir fry and rice! Lots of dashes represented the rice and I drew long strips to represent the chicken. Then I drew crescents for the peapods and circles for the carrots that Marcus liked so much.

"I can see a bit better," Marcus was shouting, "and, boy am I hungry!" New lights were blazing away all over the boulder.

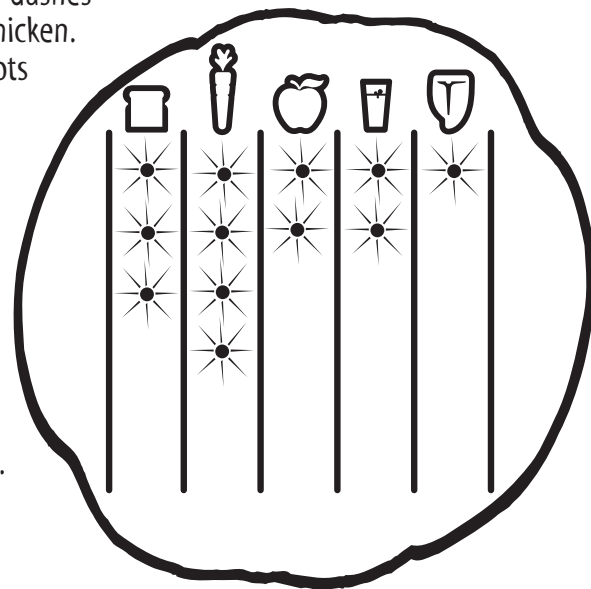
"I'm gonna break out!"

"No wait!" I yelled back. "It's too dangerous. You need more energy and tougher bones. Give me more time!"

But I could tell we were running out of time. The air in the cave was almost gone. We were so close to solving the puzzle. Was it really going to end like this?

Not if I could help it! I quickly scrawled a big glowing circle to indicate two slices of bread, and big squiggles for the fillings.

It was the old standby Marcus had loved since kindergarten: the peanut butter and banana sandwich!



"I'm better!" whooped Marcus. "The cut's healed..." He started beating on the wall with his fists. "It's moving, Arianna! We're nearly there!"

I could see that. The gigantic boulder was blazing now—the Fruit Group, now at full power, healing his body completely. I was so close to getting Marcus out of there, but my mind was a blank. One more grain, one vegetable, and another milk... but what could provide all those things?

Help! What Combination Food will free Marcus?

