



The Flag Chose a Team

Wren snatched up the green race ribbon before it could flutter off the peg. “This one means I am fastest!” she cried. Across the storybook playground, Bracken the six-year-old otter caught the orange ribbon. Both friends had decided that, by lunchtime in the sunny meadow, one of them would be first at every game.

At the edge of the grass stood a shared finish-line flag, folded around its pole. It had two little cloth loops at the bottom, one on each side, and two pawprints stitched in silver thread. Wren noticed the loops, but only because one tickled her whiskers as she dashed past. “Ready, set, race!” she shouted.



They sprang down the curving path between mushroom markers. Wren was quick at the bend, quick past the painted snail, and quick across the finish line. She lifted her green ribbon high. Bracken arrived one breath later, his orange ribbon dragging in the grass. “You took off before I was ready,” he said. “I did not!” said Wren. “You were just slow.” The green ribbon suddenly felt less bright in her paw.





“Hopscotch next,” Bracken said, with a sharp little flick of his tail. The hopscotch path was made of smooth blue, yellow, and red stones that rang like tiny bells. Wren landed neatly on one foot, then two. But at the last square, Bracken swooped past with a splendid tail-balanced hop and touched the moonstone first.

“You splashed my square!” Wren snapped. Bracken blinked. “There was no splashing. You missed it.” He tied the orange ribbon around his wrist. “You always think I am taking your win.” Wren wanted to say, Because you are. Instead she kicked a dandelion puff. Its white seeds floated between them like very small, very disappointed clouds.





Near the slide, a small game board woke with a click. Its painted meadow sparkled, and a wooden arrow spun around and around before pointing to a picture of the finish-line flag. Beneath it, curly letters appeared: THE SHARED RELAY. “Perfect,” said Wren. “One more game. Then we will know who is best.” Bracken gave a tight nod.





The board rolled itself toward the meadow, and the playground changed behind it. Seven springy clover pads popped up over a narrow brook. Beyond them stood a reed gate, tied shut with a thick knot. On the far side waited the finish line. The flagpole rose beside the first clover pad, and its flag unfurled just enough to show the two loops.

Wren grabbed one loop. Bracken grabbed the other. At once, the silver pawprints gleamed, and an arrow shone across the clover pads. “I can hop those!” Wren said. She bounded from pad to pad, light as a leaf. Bracken followed, but the fifth pad dipped under his heavier paws. Wren reached the last pad first and looked back. Bracken was stuck, gripping the flag while the brook chuckled around his ankles.

Wren could see the reed gate ahead. If she dropped the flag, she could race there alone. Her green ribbon tugged at her neck, as if it wanted to fly. Then she saw Bracken’s face. It was the same face she had made at the hopscotch path: pinched up, waiting to be blamed. Winning suddenly looked like standing by a finish line with nobody beside her.





“Hold on,” Wren said. She hopped back two clover pads and stretched out her free paw. “Put your weight on my side when I jump.” Bracken stared. “You want to help me?” “I want us to finish,” said Wren. Together they bounced across the last pads. Then Bracken used his strong tail to brace the reed gate while Wren tugged the knot loose. It popped open with a grassy sneeze.

Beyond the gate, the finish line stayed invisible. The flag hung limp until Wren and Bracken each held a loop again. Silver light ran between their paws, and the white line appeared across the meadow. “Let’s make a promise,” said Bracken. Wren swallowed. “We take turns, tell the truth, and help when help is needed.” Bracken nodded. “Even when we really, really want first.”

They replayed the relay from the start, this time calling, “Left pad!” and “Careful, it wobbles!” Wren hopped, Bracken steadied, and together they carried the shared finish-line flag through the open gate. They crossed the bright white line at exactly the same moment. Their two race ribbons fluttered side by side, and the flag gave one happy silver wave.





The small game board clicked itself shut. Wren sat in the clover beside Bracken, and he offered her half of his blackberry biscuit. “That was more exciting than winning,” Wren said, surprised to find she meant it. In the gentle playground, the hopscotch stones chimed once, as if they agreed.





Good night.



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After the story



WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Wren and Bracken turn a fierce playground contest into a magical shared relay. By helping each other across the meadow course, they discover that friendship feels better than being first.

TALK ABOUT IT AFTER READING

After reading, ask which moment felt the warmest or bravest today.

AND TOMORROW...

The next morning, the small game board opens to a picture of a kite with three tails and no instructions at all.





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7 minutes of reading



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