



Parched

Steven walked and walked and after he was finished, walked more. His feet got heavier with each step, and the moonlight was the only thing keeping him awake.

“Maybe I shoulda...naw, good riddance,” he said to himself, thinking of Reeve. “I don’t need anyone. I just need to keep moving,” he said as his stomach growled at him. “You’re right. What I really need is food.”

Steven walked some more. Soon, he began to sway, his upper body movement convinced him as though he was still walking, but his bottom half collapsed. Steven was actually sitting down.

“Crap. My body’s giving up already. Come on legs!”, he said trying to lift his legs to jump start them. Steven’s legs did not respond. The area he was sitting in looked as though a river may have run through it. The walls surrounding him had horizontal grooves, indicating the slow drainage of the canyon.

Steven took a deep breath and reached into his backpack. “Okay. One sip.” He pulled out a pouch of water with the word ‘WILL’ marked on the side of it. Suddenly, he heard the sound of sand ruffling behind him. “Hello?” No response. The second he clicked the nozzle open, over a dozen desert critters surrounded him. Fireflies zoomed about them all, illuminating the area.

“Hello,” he said slowly.

A few Rabbits who moved like mice, a Fox with a wide smile, a Tortoise bigger than an automobile, an adorable Tarantula with a more approachable color, and three Lizards, focused on Steven’s eyes.

Steven pointed to his water, “This is—”

“Get him!”, came a voice from behind.

“Augh!”

Steven booked it towards an opening in the wall, and squeezed through. The few critters which could fit made their way in, chasing Steven into a darker segment of the canyon. As he kept running, he looked up to see the remaining larger creatures had climbed above him to get a better view. The Tarantula dropped down and spun a web quickly in between a series of rocks. Steven stepped into it and tripped, dropping his water pouch.

“I did it!”, the Tarantula cheered.

The Lizards climbed into his backpack the second Steven hit the ground.

“Hey! Get outta there!”

Together, they quickly exited with a properly knotted rope and threw it to the Rabbits who rapidly raced around and over his body. Before Steven knew it, he was properly hogtied.

“What the—”

Steven noticed the Lizards also retrieving the water pouch he dropped.

“Hey! Stop! That’s all I have!”

The Rabbits passed off the rope to the Fox who scaled the wall to tie Steven to the Tortoise’s shell. The Tortoise took off as fast as he could, dragging Steven’s body at a boring pace over every rock and cacti towards the wall.

“Ow. Ow. Ow.”

As Steven was pulled up onto the wall, his face scrapped against the rough rocky material until he surfaced and they continued dragging him.

After just a few painful minutes, dropping Steven once before having to try again, the Critters all collectively stopped, and gathered around a large Cactus. Fireflies flew around everyone. Together, the Rabbits slung the rope for dragging Steven over a large Cactus and hoisted him up. As they lifted him, he swung into the Cactus with every heave from the Rabbits.

“Ow. Augh! Ow, stop!”

Eventually, the Rabbits finished their work and stood to attention in front of him. The Tortoise stared at him lazily, and the Lizards were all trying to get into the pouch as the Fox watched, still smiling. An Owl with poor eyesight flew almost too close and swooped it out of their tiny grips with her sharp talons.

“Hey! Careful! That’s a very important—”

“Water!”, came a booming voice from above Steven. He bent his body uncomfortably and looked up to see the Owl drop the pouch in the paws of a tall Mongoose who stood atop the cactus in the Owl’s nest. He was wearing a sash with the image of a Cactus on it. Behind him, a Rattlesnake slithered around the smoother surface of the Cactus and gripped it tightly, with a similar sash tied towards the end of its body. The Mongoose held the pouch high above his head in triumph as the Critters all cheered.

“Pardon me—,” Steven timidly tried to interject.

The Mongoose’s voice was too loud. “For too long has the Desert remained a barren wasteland; a precursor for the dead. The Cactuses, our once loyal friends are themselves dying and we no longer can take from them. We vowed to work together, and have been blessed by our ancestors!”

The Critters cheered again.

“No longer are we simple creatures who roam the sands, hiding in the shadows! Any monster who enters our home, we take everything...from them!”

“Everything?”, Steven looked up at his backpack, sitting atop the Tortoise’s large shell.

The Owl, who's eyes focused in two separate directions, flapped her wings. "Ooh! I say Rattlesnake poisons it!", she squawked.

"That'll ruin the meat," the Rattlesnake said. "I say you gouge its eyes out!"

"Well I suppose we should do whatever saves us the most meat," Tarantula said.

"Yeah! Yeah! Most meat! Most meat!", the three Lizards cheered.

"Excuse me!", Steven exclaimed.

All the Critters faced him.

"Listen, as adorable as this sacrifice is, I—"

The Mongoose leapt down and grabbed him by the face. "You can talk? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I don't know. I've never seen one of these before," the Owl said. "My eyes work better during the day, these nights."

"Well, what issss it?", the Rattlesnake asked.

"Human," Steven clarified.

"It's a Human," the Owl confirmed.

"Yeah, we heard it, Owl. Which is?", the Rattlesnake asked.

"I've heard about these. It's an Ocean Man!", the Owl said mystically. "See, they're actually composed of mostly water."

"Let's cut him open!", one of the tiny Rabbits suggested.

"*That* water fact is half true!", Steven shouted, correcting them.

The Mongoose hung off Steven's body and looked him in the eye. "What is your business out here Ocean Man?"

"My *name* is Steven. I'm trying to get to the mountains, but I'm taking the long way."

"Long way?", the Mongoose asked. "Our Desert is vast, there are few shortcuts through it."

"Well, there was another Human with me not long ago who was...saving me the walk."

"Another Steven?", the Owl asked.

"No. We all have different names. His name is...well, it was Reeve. Everyone here apparently calls him the Grey Ray."

All the little critters gasped and hid from Steven besides the Rattlesnake and the Mongoose. The Owl didn't seem to be paying attention.

"What just happened?", Steven asked.

The Rattlesnake slithered down to meet Steven and said, "the *Grey Ray* is the reason our home is always torn apart."

"This morning was his most recent visit," the Mongoose said.

"Oh," Steven uttered, recalling his fight with Reeve.

"And we have his closest friend!", the Rattlesnake realized.

"I wouldn't say that. More like associates, he-he," Steven mentioned casually. "Please don't cut me open."

"When it rains, we are granted a glimmer of hope the land may return to its former glory. And every moment the *Grey Ray*'s light passes through our land, it all dries up," the Mongoose said gleaming in Steven's eyes. "See, my people need this water," holding up the pouch with desire. "And you have it."

"So, Reeve is actually drying up the land on his own. Look, if you let me go, I might be able to speak with him."

"Ssssilence!", the Rattlesnake said, wrapping its body around Steven's neck and mouth.

"I still say we cut him open!", the tiny Rabbit exclaimed again.

"No!", Mongoose said.

"Oh, thank the Realm," Steven uttered to himself through being choked.

"We'll take him to where the mountains begin...", he continued.

"Oh, sweet," Steven said, letting out a sigh of relief.

"...to meet the Emperor."

They all cheered.

"What's that now? Who?"

The cute little Tarantula snipped Steven loose, dropping him to the ground abruptly.

"Ow!"

Morning light shone over the Desert as the Critters finished dragging Steven across the hot floor overnight to where the sands meet the mountains. They dragged him some more into a large cave and placed his torn and dirtied body in front of a large pile of stones.

“Emperor!”, the Rattlesnake shouted.

Steven had to rub his withered eyes to be certain he was actually looking up at a tiny Rockhopper Penguin with a large belly and flowing blonde hair beginning at his eyebrows. He was fast asleep sitting on a pile of stones, rocking a flashy hat with the same Cactus logo as the others.

The Rattlesnake had slithered closer this time and spoke softly, “Sir?”

Still Emperor Rocky slept.

The Rattlesnake shook its tail and the Penguin woke violently.

“Augh!”, Emperor Rocky screamed.

“Woah! Woah! Sir, it’s us.”

“You woke your Emperor?”, his eyes barely open.

“Sir, I’m sssorry, but—”

“I was sleeping! Did I not tell you I work all night? Long, cold—freezing nights!”

“Of course! We just—”

Emperor Rocky was already back to sleep.

“SSSSir?”, the Rattlesnake tapped him with his tail.

Emperor Rocky woke violently again.

“Well, if I have to be up, I guess I’m up! Did you find more water?”

“Yes!”, Mongoose said placing the pouch before him.

Emperor Rocky reluctantly stood, grunting, and waddled over to the pouch. He bent down to get a better look, examining it with his beady pupil amidst a blood red eye.

“What’s this?”, Emperor Rocky asked towards everyone.

“That’s mine,” Steven said, still tied up.

Emperor Rocky finally noticed Steven, waddled over to him slowly, and locked eyes. Steven was almost lost in them, as they were more off-putting than the Fiend’s eyes.

“And what’s this Human doing here?”, Emperor Rocky asked.

“Actually it’s an Ocean Man,” the Owl declared again.

“No, I’m a—”

“Ocean, eh? So you’ve brought us some water?”, Emperor Rocky asked him.

“Well, actually—”

“I was never a fan of Ocean water. Too salty. The Cactuses give off a taste so sweet, it’ll make you forget all about the Ocean! Best taste around.”

“So, you’ve traversed the tides, then?”, Steven asked.

“What does that mean?”, Emperor Rocky responded, grimacing.

“I just assumed that—”

“Because I’m an Emperor Penguin I must know how to swim? Well, let me tell you, my days of swimming are behind me. My talents lie in leading these poor critters. I’m sure they told you about the Grey Ray? The light that shoots through here at night and dries up the land? Our poor Cactuses. Frail! Someone has to be here to protect them. It’s terrible.”

“I don’t think you’re an Emperor Penguin. I’m pretty sure those are much taller.”

All the critters gasped. Emperor Rocky’s salty face turned into a disgusted one as he stood on Steven’s chest, looked him dead in the eye and said, “I *am* an Emperor. How else do you expect these creatures to help themselves. They are in poor condition, terrible, actually.”

“Right.”

“If it weren’t for my expert management skills, and gorgeous locks,” he said shaking his golden hair, “they may never have had a proper leader come along.”

“I don’t know, the Mongoose seems to be handling the others well.”

“Mongoose and Snakes don’t get along, everyone knows that. Foxes chase Rabbits. And who knows what a Tarantula would do if it wasn’t properly kept in line, I mean look at it!”

Everyone glanced at the Tarantula.

“What? What’s wrong with me?”, the poor Tarantula asked, covering her face with her many arms.

“Thanks to me, they aren’t crawling all over each other for a few drops of water,” Emperor Rocky said, picking up the pouch. “I’ve been around this stuff a long time. Very long! It’s incredible. I know how to ration properly.”

“Listen, Rocky,” Steven began staring at the pouch.

“*Emperor* Rocky,” he said waddling back to his pile of rocks. “Actually, just Emperor.”

“Emperor. I just need to get through to the mountains and I’m almost there, so—”

“So, you think that I’ve excused you?”

“Well—”

“Silence!”

Steven quieted himself.

“Let me sip of your water, and decide whether or not you are worthy to leave.”

“Actually, that’s all the water I have left from home.”

“Then we’ll give you more if I so choose.”

“It’s just...my father—”

Emperor Rocky cut him off with a disgusting look.

“Fine. Please just a sip.”

“I’ll take as much as I please, thank you!”

Steven looked nervous as the small flipper Penguin attempted to open the pouch, but couldn’t due to his lack of opposable thumbs.

“Erg—ugh! Confound it! This leathery contraption is surely broken! What horrible craftsmanship!”

Steven tried to help, “There’s a—if you just grip the nozzle tightly you can carefully—”

Rocky bit the top and tore the nozzle from the rest of the pouch as the water spilled out into his mouth, but mostly onto the floor of the Desert. The Critters groaned when they saw the water seep into the sand. Steven didn’t make a sound as he stared longingly at the damp spot in the sand slowly evaporate, along with the hope for quenching his thirst.

“Puh!”, Emperor Rocky spat, spewing out the water. “What is this? I was hoping for some salty flavor, at least. I thought you were an Ocean Man.”

“I told you I—”

“I mean, wow. For a creature with usually great access to resources—bleh! Disgusting, and far too warm,” Emperor Rocky said throwing the torn pouch.

“That was the last—”

“Water you had, I know. You’re welcome. We’ll find you some more later,” he said returning to his stone throne. “Some better tasting. Now, we’re going to need your help. The Critters and I have had enough trouble reaching the Juicy Cactuses atop the cave. You see they’re much too tall, and...”, Emperor Rocky rambled on, his voice fading from Steven as he focused on the sand where the water spot was.

Steven’s face grew into a much more determined look. He struggled to stand while tied up, as the Tarantula’s knot was quite tight. Using a boulder against his back, he eventually made it to his feet before Emperor Rocky knew what he was doing.

“...and we’ll need that done before—,” Emperor Rocky looked up to see Steven hopping away. “Hey! You’re being held captive!”

“I don’t care. I need to get to the mountains,” Steven said, continuing to hop away from him.

“Hey! Get back here! You’re...you’re under arrest!”

“Shut up!”, Steven shouted, echoing through the cave. He turned back, and hopped back to look Rocky in the face. “I don’t care about helping you, you stupid bird. My father entered the Realm with that pouch when I was a child and never returned. I was so worried of losing it, I never pulled it out, until I reached this scorching desert because now, the only person who was willing to help me is gone, and it’s all my fault!”, Steven finished ranting, coming to a bit of a realization.

“Your father?”, the tiny violent bunny from earlier asked, quite interested.

“No! It’s the Grey Ray!”, the Rattlesnake said. “Don’t you ssssee? They were friends!”

“And now he’s sad because he’s gone!”, the Tarantula clarified.

“Nonsense! He’s sad because his water tastes awful. I would be if I were him!”, Emperor Rocky said.

“No, they’re right. I was angry. I’ve been angry for a long time. I’ve been alone since I entered the Realm and I think I was convinced I needed to remain that way,” Steven said, taking moments to pause and think to himself. All the critters around him were sobbing. “But you all. You’re meant to be alone. Foxes, rattlesnakes, giant spiders...”

“What’s a spider?”, the Tarantula asked.

“...you’re all not famously known for relying on one other, but you do. Somehow, you do.”

“We have to,” the Mongoose said, climbing onto a boulder to remain eye level with Steven. “I think we’ve all realized the Cactuses are a part of our family, and to save ourselves, we have to save them.”

“Well,” Steven thought. “Maybe stop letting your emperor suck them dry every night.”

A silence fell over the critter crowd, their focus solely on Steven.

“What?”, the Rattlesnake said.

“Well, it’s pretty obvious to me. He’s thirsty, just like you all. Somehow he’s convinced you with his words into thinking he’s doing it for you, when he’s just doing what any Rockhopper Penguin would do if left in the desert.”

“But he told us it was the Grey Ray,” one Lizard uttered.

“I don’t doubt that Reeve has an effect on the Realm, but I don’t think he could dry up the whole desert in a single run. He can’t even really reach the speed of light. I also don’t think he’d want to; Reeve seems to really like Cactus water. But the reason Rocky is so tired is because he was probably up all night drinking Cactus water. I mean I could smell a lot of it on his breath.”

In unison, all the critters faced Emperor Rocky’s throne only to find an empty seat and his hat.

“Find him,” the Mongoose said.

The critters scattered in every direction to search for the one responsible for their misery.

Steven was left standing alone, still tied up. “No, it’s fine. I’ll just help myself guys!”

Steven sighed, and began hopping again. He reached a large wall and examined it carefully. “Okay, I got this.”

Steven leapt and in one motion attempted to place both feet on the side of the wall, but failed and hit the floor directly on his back hard.

“Ow! Oh god, I do miss Reeve.”

Meanwhile, the critters had chased Rocky to the top of his cave where the tall Juicy Cactuses he spoke of earlier were standing.

“Stand back, you *animals!*”

“You’ve been sucking the Cactuses dry? Our own family?!”, the Mongoose said.

“Oh, these spike trees aren’t family! They’re nothing but trouble! They hurt when I climb them, and...you know, the water is so sweet, too sweet even! It makes me dizzy.”

“That’sssss because you aren’t one of ussssss!”, the Rattlesnake hissed aggressively, shaking his rattle, and slithering closer.

“Stand back!”, Rocky said, climbing the Cactus. “Ow! I’m—your elected—Ow!—Emperor!”

“Not for long you’re not,” the Fox said menacingly.

Rocky dug his beak into the Cactus and began to syphon the juicy water from inside.

“SSSSSomeone sstop him!”, the Rattlesnake shouted.

“Wait,” the Mongoose said. “Let him drink.”

Rocky drank and drank and drank. He hopped his pudgy body to the next Cactus, clutching its side tightly, ignoring the pain in his flippers and continued gulping. He hopped from Cactus to Cactus extracting the liquid until he felt there was none left.

Back at the cave, Steven was lying on his back looking up at the stars. His eyes switched from star to star as he thought about his friend. He spun over and crawled like a caterpillar towards the wall. He organized a series of stones from Rocky’s pile to make a ramp leading up to the wall. Steven hopped his way across, traversing to the side of the wall. He shifted carefully up the wall as simply as he did along the Path, yet as to not separate a single foot from its side. Once he had reached the top, he realized he was gonna have difficulty transitioning over the corner.

Steven looked down and said, “Ugh, I didn’t think this through.”

“Yep,” came Reeve’s voice from above Steven, sitting next to a Cactus. He was sipping some Cactus water out of a bowl, which was made from the plant itself.

“Reeve! Oh, thank the Realm, I’m so happy to see you. You wouldn’t believe what’s happened to me.”

“I might have some idea,” he said taking another sip.

“Where’d you get that?”, hopping a little closer.

“Cactus gave it to me.”

“Very funny. Now, can you come get me out?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, it’s just—”

“Because I can go,” Reeve said, pretending to stand up.

“No!”, Steven said desperately. “Please, for the Realms-sake no! I need some help, alright? I don’t know if I’ll make it over the edge like this.”

“The edge?”, Reeve asked. “Well, as far as I’m concerned there is a lot more you won’t make it through without me.”

“Reeve—”

“Giant gaps in the Path, Asporas, crazed Penguins with an army of Critters. You sure you can handle this Realm alone?”

“Listen, I’m—”

“No, you listen! I heard everything you said to the bird. You’re angry. That’s why you’re here.”

Steven looked at his feet.

“I don’t remember what it’s like to lose someone,” Reeve said. “But I’m guessing you’re willing to do anything to find out the truth.”

“I’m sorry I told you I don’t need you. I think I was scared I wouldn’t make it any further.”

“Well, I still can’t promise you we’ll make it to the end of the Path,” Reeve said finishing his bowl of Cactus water. “But I can promise you this,” he began, setting his empty Cactus bowl upside down on Steven’s head. “I’m your best bet.”

“Fine with me,” Steven said, trying to keep his cool as the sticky juice dripped down his face.

Reeve grinned, reached forward and lifted Steven onto the top of the cave’s wall. After untying Steven out of his own rope, he placed it back in his backpack.

“What do we do about the Critters?”, Steven asked, stretching. “Shouldn’t we help them with Rocky?”

“The penguin? He doesn’t belong here. I’m sure the Cactuses will take care of him,” Reeve said walking towards the Juicy Cactus pasture. They passed the scene that had surely evolving during their conversation.

Rocky was on the last Cactus. Visibly dizzy, he had a crazed look in his red eyes.

“Ha ha! I’ve never felt this way before!”, Rocky shouted hysterically. “You fools! I am your Emperor!”

The Critters all watched peacefully as the hallucinogens from the Cactus water began to kick into Rocky’s brain.

“Emperor Rocky!”, he cooed. “Ooooooh!”

Emperor Rocky’s smile faded when he looked at the Cactus. A horrifying face began to take shape in it.

“No! Stay back!”, he screamed, hopping to the next one, a needle piercing him in the flipper, causing him to lose balance and fell to the ground. Rocky looked up to see the Cactuses seemingly leer at him hauntingly. “No! You aren’t real! I wanna go back to my tank!”

Emperor Rocky waddled off fast into the horizon, horrified by each passing Cactus.

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Mt. Sôr

The snow covered Mountains glowed in the morning light, the highest peak in the whole Realm, Mt. Sôr shining above the Desert. A grey and green flash of light streamed across the peaks and before long, Reeve and Steven came into the visible light out of it.

“Alright, I’m tired. The Cactus Juice is wearing off,” Reeve said as Steven climbed off his back. Their surroundings were covered in snow, aside from the trail behind them, still steaming from Reeve’s last run.

“So, Rocky *wasn’t* lying,” Steven said. “You were drying up the Cactuses.”

“What? Of course not. I’m great friends with them. Alcohol never remained in the Realm so you gotta have hookups around here.”

“Yeah, but look,” Steven said gesturing to the melted path behind them.

“I know. I’m incredible. Like I said, the Cactuses and I are cool. They don’t mind me much at all. They’ve got plenty of water left to survive. By morning, if there isn’t some destructive Penguin sucking them dry they’re all back to normal.”

“I’m just saying you’re not the most subtle when it comes to other people’s issues.”

“Everyone here blames me for their problems. What, am I supposed to solve all of them? Now come on, we’ve gotta make it to the bottom. I just took care of *your* problem; having to walk up the steepest part of Mt. Sôr.”

“There you go again, making others feel like they’re blessed just being in your presence. Look, Reeve, I appreciate your help, but you’re not that special, you know?”

Reeve froze. He didn’t even turn to face Steven.

“Really?”, Steven asked, walking over to face Reeve.

“I’m sorry, okay. I—”

Steven noticed Reeve was actually frozen cold. His grey complexion grew a hint of blue in it. He looked down and saw there was a small arrow with a misty vapor surrounding it stuck in his side. After hearing a rustling in the trees, a tall, nimble woman leapt out of them and landed next to Reeve, still frozen in place. She had long flowing blonde hair, her bangs draped over her right eye, and her beautiful complexion showing through one side of her face. She was wrapped to stay warm in a thick, navy coat with a quiver strapped to her back.

“Uh...hello?”, Steven uttered.

The woman looked at Steven, not very concerned at all. She placed her bow over herself, picked up Reeve, and threw him over her shoulder with ease.

“Um,” Steven uttered before really thinking over the woman’s strength.

She stopped to listen.

“Can I have my friend back?”, he asked carefully.

“I need to speak with him first,” the woman spoke before leaping up the side of the mountain with no problem. She looked down, smiling at Steven’s persistence, navigating his way up the side of the mountain at a quick pace to keep up with her.

“Hungry?”, she asked.

“Actually, yeah, I’m starving,” Steven said, quite surprised by the kidnappers hospitality.

She continued leaping until she reached the top where a bright orange light was illuminating the area. A Fire was started and there was a flightless bird roasting over it.

“Whew,” Steven uttered. “I was worried you were going to cook him.”

She placed Reeve down carefully with his head closest to the Fire.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t taste good at all,” Steven said.

She smiled and began to prepare dinner.

“You know,” Steven began, “I’ve never seen him remain still for so long. How long do you expect him to be frozen?”

“Most creatures thaw out from my arrows rather quickly once their minds have settled,” she spoke slowly with weight to her voice. “Reeve here is a special circumstance. So I suppose, he’ll return to normal when the Fire *he started* desires.”

“I don’t follow.”

As she cut pieces of meat off, she told Steven, “Not too long ago, this man, ‘the Grey Ray,’ appeared suddenly for a split second, ran right through our mountain, melting the snow, and setting a blaze to the trees. Even in this bitter cold, the flames burned great scars on our mountain for days until we could contain them. This Fire in front of you is one of many which remain from the last time he was here.”

“It’s still burning? You’ve kept it alive?”

“I haven’t done a thing for the Fire. Mt. Sôr is vast, and I am one of many Archers scattered across the mountain. We remain high up on this peak and witness all that happens in the Realm. This Fire hasn’t settled since he left, and there are several of them we keep contained across the mountain so we may benefit from them.”

“So, Reeve has actually helped you survive?”

“In a way. My people, like most Humans were forced to remain here. We learned to adapt to the Realm’s harsh environment along these Fires which are truly one of the best known power sources this

side of our world. Not necessarily for their warmth, the mountain weather is quite easy to handle for us. Though, the Fire does make cooking a lot easier,” taking a large bite off the bird leg.

“What did you mean by forced to remain here?”

She paused and looked him in the eyes as though she had been waiting to tell him, “Paradise is disappearing, Steven.”

Steven choked on the bird meat a bit and said, “Wh—it what?”

“You haven’t been with us too long, but you certainly are adjusting to the Realm well. I was impressed with your actions in the Comfort Zone. Which reminds me, I’m sorry you can’t find your father. He’s a shining example of a Human Being.”

Steven stood to attention. “You know him?!”

She raised her hand and gestured for him to relax and eat. Steven took a breath and returned to his seat and bird, quite shaken up by all the knowledge he just gained.

“Not personally. But all the Archers on the mountains witnessed all the good he’s done for the Realm. When things began to change so drastically, he traveled all over making sure the remaining Humans had a place to feel comfortable. Thus, the Comfort Zone was built.”

“You mean, my father *actually* designed it?”

“He was a talented architect, and he had a determined team alongside him. They all worked tirelessly to help make it a home; until the Asporas appeared, nasty things.”

“I was just talking to Gor and Ort to distract them. I had no idea. I mean my mother used to say he left to build us a home in Paradise.”

“The Gathering Place. That soon became an uninhabitable home for Humans. So, he built one along the Path. And he built it for everyone and everything.”

Steven took a bite of the bird and thought. “And what about Paradise.”

“I’m sorry Steven. I don’t know how to help you. If I were you I’d try to make a home somewhere safe out here.”

“I just need to know what happened to it. Why is it gone?”

“Not gone. Hidden.”

Reeve’s head began to warm up as the blood moved through his face. “I am special! There’s no one else here like me,” Reeve said, finishing the conversation from earlier. He looked around, his body still frozen. “What uh—where am I?”

“Why are you traveling with Will’s son?”, the Archer asked immediately.

“Crap. An Archer,” he said, before noticing his friend was there. “Wh—Steven?!”

“Sorry, buddy,” Steven said. “She’s quite the shot. And cook!”, taking another bite, holding up her work. “Real *sweet* meat.”

“Why are you traveling with Will’s son?”, the Archer asked.

“Sidewalker? I don’t know a Will, but that’s none of your business, anyway. Man, my feet are cold.”

“This is really sweet, actually,” Steven continued, still listening to their confrontation.

“I’ve been waiting long enough for you to slow down. Finally got a bead on you, Reeve,” she said placing her heavy boot on his chest. “Explain yourself.”

Reeve groaned from the pressure. “Just because you have me captive doesn’t mean I have to tell you anything.”

“Wait a minute,” Steven thought out loud, pointing to the meat, “Is this—?”

“Fine!”, she went on, ignoring Steven. “Then I guess this is how you will remain; frozen. You started this Fire, and it may *never* stop burning, but it won’t warm you back to normal until it so desires.”

“Well, *Archer*, I don’t know what I did, so I can’t really help, can I? I thought you guys saw everything.”

Steven shrugged, and continued eating the meat anyway.

“It isn’t our responsibility to tell you what you did wrong. Archers only remain on Mt. Sôr to stop others like you from being reckless.”

“I don’t know, okay! I don’t! Gosh, why does everyone hate me so much?”

“How about ever since Paradise began to hide you’ve been running at incredible speeds all over the place. Explain that.”

“I know. I’m amazing. But I don’t know why Paradise is hiding! I want to figure it out too!”

“Why?” she pressed, pushing her boot into his chest harder.

“Because I just want to go back to sleep!”

The others remained silent and looked at each other.

“I rarely get a chance to get good sleep, but when I do it’s just...the best.”

“That’s what you were doing when I found you,” Steven recalled.

“I used to just drink Cactus juice until I passed out. I mean a lot. There’s this particular one that grew on top of the cave I found you in, *so* good. I mean if you’re ever looking for a good time—”

Reeve noticed they had grown uninterested in this portion of his story.

“Sorry. Anyways, when I couldn’t drink, I would just run. I’d run and run until my feet felt like they would fall off. I’d have no choice, but to collapse. I would just lie there and look up at the stars. When darkness comes, there’s something so soothing about those lights in the sky. After I made up enough stories about them, my eyes would grow heavy and it would begin to feel like I’m finally asleep.”

Reeve’s eyes were fixated on the stars again. “I don’t know if I really am, but...I see this face. It feels like a dream because I’ve never met someone so beautiful before. And then I wake up,” Reeve said gesturing with his hands. “Ooh!”, he said, realizing he could move his torso again. He grabbed a piece of meat and joined the others in eating.

“I don’t understand,” the Archer said.

“Me neither,” Reeve uttered in between bites. “And it doesn’t last long,” finishing his portion already, moving on to the next one.

“Well,” Steven began, “I’ve heard you can’t make up faces in your dreams. All the ones you believe your brain is creating, it’s simply piecing together different ones you’ve already seen before.”

“Hm.”

The Archer turned to focus on Steven. “If you two really intend to reach Paradise, and want to find out how to get there, I suggest you head back to where the Asporas first appeared.”

“We can’t,” Steven said.

“Yeah, didn’t you see me give Gor the ol’ 1-2? The whole structure went KERSPLOOSH in the Ocean,” Reeve illustrated.

“Beyond the Comfort Zone.”

“There is no...wait, you mean...,” Reeve said.

“What?” Steven asked.

“I don’t think...yeah, we shouldn’t go down there.”

“Down where?!”, Steven demanded.

Reeve eyeballed the Archer.

“What?” the Archer asked Reeve. “You scared? I thought you knew everything about the Realm.”

“I know everything I have to know,” Reeve said defensively. “And I know *no* Human has been there before.”

“Been where?!” Steven asked more aggressively.

“We don’t have to actually do that, Steven, we can just head straight for—”

“*No one enters the Gathering Place,*” the Archer enforced.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Reeve assured Steven.

The Archer shook her head and gestured for Steven to follow her, which he did.

“Hey!”, Reeve shouted, only his upper body full of energy. “Come back! I’m a part of this!”

The Archer led Steven up a small hill to one of her perches hidden in a tree. She leapt up it easily and Steven walked up the side of it.

“Steven. You have...a unique perspective, I’ll give you that,” the Archer said with a smile. “It’s probably what’s kept you alive here for so long. Especially with *him* tagging along. Here’s the truth Reeve has trouble facing: I don’t know if Paradise wants anyone entering her grounds anymore.”

“You’ve been there?”

“No. Nobody has gotten close since the *Grey Ray* back there appeared. You probably can’t see that green mess in the distance down there, can you?”, the Archer said pointing towards what Steven recognizes as a pink mist or fog. Humans can only see a fraction of what’s really ahead of them in the Realm. Steven shook his head.

“My people can see far distances. Very far. So far, some can even see across Time itself. The Garden there has been growing just beyond Mt. Sôr’s end, and has remained wrapped around the Gathering Place.”

“Well, certainly people have tried to enter it by now?”

“Sure. But no one has ever left. See, the Comfort Zone was overthrown fairly soon after your father finished its construction,” the Archer said before pausing to look toward the Garden with a smile, as though she were admiring its beauty from here. “Not long after that, this Garden began to grow, and cover the Gathering Place, as if it were...guarding Paradise. Any Human who enters it, never walks out.”

“So then, what’s this place no Human has ever been? The place Reeve is so worried about.”

The Archer looked down at her weapon and back up at Steven. “You amazed me when you figured out how to traverse the Break. I still don’t know how you did it exactly. But before that, there was another, much smaller one. It appeared as if from no where after Paradise began to disappear. It was precisely this location where your father was determined to build a bridge. This way, the Path would still continue and Humanity could flourish along it to converse, share ideas, and dwell in the Realm safely.”

“During the Comfort Zone’s construction, the Humans who aided your father spoke of hearing the sound of crawling in the walls. And chewing, loud gnawing sounds. Something had been eating away

at the Path, breaking it apart bit by bit. Something was trying to stop any humans who entered from leaving the Realm.”

“The Asporas,” Steven surmised.

“No one could have known who they were or where they came from, but they were listening to the Humans talk about their lives from within the wall of the Path. The Asporan Tunnels are the only place my eyes cannot see. There, you may be lucky enough to find a clue on how to enter the Garden.”

“Tunnels. That’s what Reeve is scared of?”

“Not *scared!*”, Reeve shouted, after gathering what strength he had at all to drag his body to their location. “Just...uncomfortable. I mean, who would want to spend any of their time in a *dark*, claustrophobic tunnel.”

“No one likes being in the Tunnels, Reeve. Not even Time.”

“What’s that now?”, Steven asked.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed. Time moves at an odd pace in the Realm compared to the world you’re used to, Steven. I’ve met Humans here who don’t even age. In the Asporan Tunnels, Time doesn’t move at all.”

“Well...my abilities are useless if I can’t see where I’m going,” Reeve added.

Steven gestured to his feet, still frozen. “You’re already useless.”

“Thanks,” Reeve said. “Well...um, I can’t leave until the fire lets me, right?”

The Archer smiled at Steven. She reached into her quiver and pulled out a handful of arrows similar to the one she used to shoot Reeve with earlier, and he flinched this time. She gathered the arrows, bound them together, and after readying the tips to sustain a flame, lit them on the Fire. She then handed the Fire to Reeve as a torch.

Reeve sighed, “Swell.”

The Archer looked up, gazing past the Garden, “The light of Paradise is fading from here. You’re gonna need a faster way down the mountain,” the Archer said, standing.

“Well, if only I was in a more capable position to help out,” Reeve said.

“Don’t blame me for your problems,” the Archer explained while examining the trees atop the mountain hill for the proper wood. “I did my job. It’s not my fault the Fire you’re responsible for isn’t willing to thaw you out yet.”

She smirked, uttering, “There.” The Archer pulled a few arrows out from her quiver and took aim at the base of a large tree. The first arrow froze the trunk and the ice grew upwards. Her second arrow shattered the trunk, and the new base of the tree dropped hard. After slowly tipping, it toppled over and began to slide down the hill at an alarming rate.

Without flinching, she pulled arrows out at a consistent rate, firing them at the frozen ice tree to sculpt it. By the time it promptly reached them, it was shaped into a fully working toboggan.

“Show off,” Reeve said under his breath.

“Ride this to the Desert,” the Archer said writing a note. She rolled it up, bound it to an arrow and while barely aiming, fired it into the sky. The two of them climbed into their new ride. “You’ll meet up with the Mongoose you helped earlier, Steven. He’ll tell you what to do next.”

“Wait,” Steven said, placing his hand on her large boot she was planning to use to accelerate them. “What’s your real name?”

The Archer smiled. “Tara,” and pushed with an immense strength.

~



Tunnel Vision

As Reeve and Steven made their way down the dark slope of Mt. Sôr via ice-wood toboggan, the light from the Fire illuminated the path in front of them. They were gaining incredible speed as Steven steered their way passed obstacles.

“Hey Steven?”, Reeve asked.

“Yeah?”, he responded, trying to focus.

“How are we slowing this down?”

In the desert below, the Mongoose was standing proudly on top of one of the Juicy Cactuses with the Owl next to him, who was in charge of keeping an eye(or two, possibly) out for Reeve and Steven.

“They almost here, Owl?”, the Mongoose asked, squinting.

“Yes, sir,” the Owl confirmed. “They should arrive in ten.”

“Ten?”

“Then they’ll be here.”

“Owl. Ten what?”

“*Then* they’ll be here.”

“No, Owl. Ten what? Ten minutes?”

“Oh. Ten seconds.”

The Mongoose quickly shifted his attention back ahead of himself. The toboggan was soon close enough to slam right into the Cactus pasture, as he heard the screams from Reeve and Steven grow louder. The Mongoose flinched when suddenly three glowing arrows appeared above, ahead of their ride, striking the sand in succession. The first arrow caused the sand ahead of the Cactuses to freeze and build up into a snowy hill. The second arrow sharpened the hill into a ramp, and the toboggan rode up and up until their momentum was completely lost. As they slid backward, the third arrow struck the snow behind them, growing into another ramp, and the two of them simply waited until their ride stopped sliding back and forth in their Archer's impromptu half pipe.

Steven stepped out of the toboggan with ease, as his experience shifting perspective gave him a much easier time at adjusting to their position. Reeve however was dizzy, having little control, leaned over the side of the toboggan and declared, "Cactus Juice! Please!"

The Mongoose brought him a small helping which evened him out right away.

"So, this is what the Grey Ray looks like slowed down."

"Hey, you got anything stronger?," Reeve's first words were to the Mongoose. "I can't really feel my legs."

The Mongoose nodded at the Owl who went to gather Reeve's request. "I got the Archer's message," he said, holding up an arrow with a note attached. "I don't understand why in the Realm you would ever wish to reach the Asporan Tunnels, but you were of great help to us with Rocky so I've gathered a couple assistants."

The Mongoose gestured to a group of large Meerkats all cleaning each other, standing at about half Steven's size.

"Um," Reeve began, "These are rodents. We were looking for more of the coyote or wolf type."

"What's wrong with rodents?," the Mongoose asked.

Reeve fell silent, sipping Cactus water.

"The Asporan Tunnels run under most of this side of the Realm, but there is only one entrance into them," the Mongoose said. "The Comfort Zone, where the Asporas first appeared. The Archer mentioned you two won't make it there, so..."

"They're adorable," Steven said.

"Try not to mention that to them," the Mongoose whispered. "They're your only way down."

The Mongoose whistled at a high pitch tone and the Meerkats went to work, assembling around the toboggan, some pushing it, others digging aggressively, and soon enough had crafted a tunnel wide enough to fit the entire toboggan inside.

"Wow," Reeve said finishing his drink the Owl brought him. "Impressive."

“We all learn from each other out here, and the Meerkats sure teach us the true value of family. Thanks to Steven, we’re able to ration our water out a lot easier, so everyone in the Desert may benefit during these hard times. The Meerkats will have plenty of energy to get you to the Tunnels.”

“You mean through?”, Steven said climbing back into the toboggan.

“No,” the Mongoose said. “The Meerkats are natural born burrowers, but the Asporan Tunnels are no place for them, or anyone for that matter. How one could stand their smell alone is a mystery to me. I have seen them once, when the drought began I once dug too far for some water. I could hear the sound of crawling in every direction. The constant gnawing sound is enough to make you go insane. Anyways, good luck!”, the Mongoose said turning back to the Critters. “Okay! Let’s get to work thawing this baby out!”, the Critters cheered as they climbed their new giant ice block.

~

The Meerkats were digging and digging, lowering the toboggan all the way down as things began to grow darker. They stopped moving suddenly, collectively sniffed the air, and retreated back to the surface.

“Guess that’s our cue,” Steven said, standing out of the toboggan, pushing through the wall of dirt in front of them.

Inside the Asporan Tunnels, there was a horrendous stench which carried like fog with the strength of a dozen barges of human waste. It hit Reeve and Steven like a tidal wave as soon as they broke through. The weak dirt gave way when the toboggan’s weight pushed Steven back into it, sliding them into the Tunnels.

“Woah!”, Reeve said grabbing his nose.

“Oh man,” Steven said, doing the same. “It’s—oh Realm save me, I can barely talk! When I open my mouth I can taste it.”

“You sure—oh god, you sure we have to do this?”

“Tara said it, not me. If we’re—”, Steven stopped, the smell causing him to pause, clutching his mouth. “If we’re gonna make it through the Garden, we’ve gotta figure out what made it appear.”

“Come on, let’s just leave.” Reeve held his nose shut. “We’ll figure out another way into the Gathering Place.”

“No! If Tara can’t even see down here, then there must be something worth discovering.”

“How do we even know she didn’t just send us down here to die?”

“There’s just no way. She knew the truth about my father. Now it’s our job to figure out the rest. I can’t return home without it.”

Reeve took notice of Steven’s face as he plugged his nose. There was something he wasn’t telling him. “You know, you haven’t really mentioned your mother much. What was she like?”

Without facing him he responded, “She was so full of life, until she began to get sick...very sick. My father left, in hopes to build us a new home just outside Paradise. I guess he was convinced the natural properties could help, but, he never returned home. No letter...nothing. She gave up a long time ago, but I never stopped hoping because it just...it didn’t feel right. When his belongings washed up on the shores of our island, she’d lost all interest. I couldn’t have been happier, but she just sat there smiling and nodding.”

“Smiling?”

“Parental smile. The kind of patronizing one. She wanted me to give up before I got too deep and not to get my hopes up. I think she was afraid I’d leave her like he did.”

“But you did.”

“She doesn’t know I’m gone. My family is watching over her. I just couldn’t tell her where I was going. It would break her heart.”

Steven stood up confidently.

“My father may not be alive, but I know he would want me to figure out what happened to Paradise. Someone hurt her, and I’m going to find the truth,” Steven said looking forward into the dark abyss of the Tunnel. “You know, the Beetle told me the ground swallowed the Humans who wished to do Paradise wrong.”

“Swallowed them?”

“She said the Land lost its patience.”

Reeve looked at the ground nervously.

“That could be where this stench is coming from,” Steven said.

“You mean all the bodies are composting in the walls of the Tunnel?”

“It’s possible,” Steven said looking back at the darkness. “I think I need to go alone.”

“What? You’re gonna leave me in the dark?”

Steven began taking his backpack off, “You can keep the Fire. Tara said you two need to stick together anyway.”

“So, you’re just going to head in there?”

Steven pulled out the coiled up rope the critters borrowed to tie him up.

“The rope?”, Reeve asked. “I mean, an actual weapon would be more helpful.”

“I don’t need one. This and the pouch is all I found in my father’s backpack when it appeared on our beach that day. He used to say ‘knowledge is your greatest weapon.’ It’s all my father needed. It’s all I’ll need. Here,” Steven said throwing him one end. “Tie it to yourself. If I tug twice, pull.”

“I’m not trying to get eaten by the floor, Steven.”

“You’ll be fine,” Steven said, walking into the shadows. “If you get bored, just keep talking to the Fire,” he shouted back.

Reeve reluctantly looked at the Fire as though they were awkwardly left alone with each other.

~

Steven felt his way along the walls of the Asporan Tunnels. After walking just a few minutes he could no longer see the light of the Fire. The smell was surely not getting any easier to handle.

“Oh, man,” he said shaking his head. “I hope I’m going the right way.”

He felt something run along his foot, which caused him to tense up.

“Okaaaay,” Steven said, pursing his lips together to fight it. “Just a bug. That’s all.”

“Well, I certainly hope bugs don’t scare you,” came a familiar voice.

Steven spun around. He shifted in every direction looking for the source of the voice. He thought to himself, ‘Perhaps I imagined it.’ He returned to his walk just before he felt a rough grip on the side of his shoulders. He was suddenly lifted into the air and passed along to another pair of arms, and another, and another until he met the face of the vermin who fell first into the Ocean, Ort.

“Greetings,” Ort said with a wide smirk.

Steven reached for his rope as quickly as he could, but it came up short. Ort had snipped it, and was still grinning at him.

“Oh, hell.”

“Precisely,” Ort uttered before burrowing into the wall with Steven in his tight grip. Steven closed his eyes and could only hope whatever Ort was planning would be quick and painless.

~

Reeve was playing with the small faded flame of the Fire as it danced in front of this face.

Reeve sighed, “I’m so bored.”

The flames moved slowly, as there was little oxygen for them to remain strong.

“I’m pretty worried about Steven. I mean, he hasn’t really been here that long and he’s so confident. Guess his father must have been like him. Did you know him?”

The flame flickered normally.

“Yeah, me neither...I think. Sounds like a good guy. I wish I knew who I was searching for. Like I said, I only remember her face; I’m not good with names. You’re Fire, right? Or was it Torch?”

The Fire’s flame moved back and forth as usual.

“Do you know any good jokes?”

~

Back in the clutches of the denim vested Aspora, Ort and Steven popped out of the wall into another tunnel leading to a large open room buried underground. The whole cave was shaped like a dome, and there were tiny plants lining the walls which lit the entire area with their bioluminescence.

Steven, gasping for air, coughing, was thrown onto the floor in front of a group of Asporas, each more disgusting than the last. They all gathered around Steven to munch on his body, their drool dripping onto him, when a booming voice came over their growling.

“Stop!”

They all turned to face Gor, who was now sporting a large scar on her face from when Reeve sonically struck her with his foot. She crawled toward Steven at a rapid pace, and as soon as she got close enough to him, she began sniffing deeply.

“Where is the Grey Ray?”, she asked.

“Not here,” Steven said confidently. “He left me,” hoping that would dismay their attention for finding his friend.

“Ha!”, Ort said. “I can smell the lie on that.”

“No it’s true. He left me shortly after you all fell into the Ocean. I had to traverse the Desert alone before I dug my way down here. Why would he come into the Tunnels?”, Steven offered. “There’s nothing for him down here. You all know how selfish he is.”

“Yes,” Gor shook her head, “but I also know how cunning he is that he may persuade a Human to do his dirty work for him.”

“I came to the Tunnels for myself.”

“Unless your intention is to die a horrible death suffocating in the Realm’s Tunnels, to then waste away with the remaining Humans, there is no benefit for you in our home.”

“So, it’s true. That’s what the smell is.”

“What smell?”, Ort asked. “The only smell I detect is from your foul brain.”

“The smell is of my own blood. I’m the son of William, who led the construction of the Comfort Zone before you took it from the Humans.”

“Ah, yes,” Gor recalled. “You mentioned him before the Grey Ray struck me down.”

“Do you honestly believe he built our home?”, Ort said. “The one you two unjustly destroyed.”

“That *home* was meant for everyone!”, Steven shouted. All around the cave, small bioluminescent plants glowed brightly and more grew up out of the wall.

~

Meanwhile, Reeve, unbeknown to Steven’s troubles, still conversed with the Fire. “And that was the third time I got a little too...numb off Cactus juice. I still don’t know if that village ever repaired all the damage.”

The Fire danced lively, as though it was trying to tell him something.

“Yeah, sometimes I wish the stories I had left weren’t about me getting inebriated. I mean, at this rate, it’s just about getting closer to her...”

Reeve looked over at the rope, which he noticed hadn’t moved much lately.

“...whoever she is, I want to find her. I think she’s the key to understanding—”

The flame grew wild in front of his face, causing him to push it away from his face.

“Woah,” Reeve said. “What’s wrong, Torchy?”

Reeve reached down to grab the rope, which felt far looser than before.

“Uh oh,” Reeve said, his eyes wide. He tugged harder on the rope, pulling and pulling and pulling until he saw the end of it appear, without his comrade attached.

“Oh, Hell! Oh, Realm! My only friend is gone! I could have saved him and he’d dead! This is all my fault! If I had just figured out sooner what’s wrong with me—Augh! I could’ve save him! I wish I knew why I was like this! Why didn’t you tell me?!”, shouting at the flame.

The Fire’s light began to fade.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you, I’m just...disappointed in myself. I mean, maybe he’s okay. Maybe he had to cut the rope to get further,” Reeve said nervously looking at the Fire for answers.

“Screw it,” he said, getting into an army crawl position, sticking the torch between his teeth. Reeve dug his elbows into the muddy ground, pushing himself along.

~

The Asporan cave glowed brightly in teal bursts across the dome. The plants were getting excited over Steven's confrontation.

"Steven," Gor said. "You're getting anxious. You're upset because you think my kind stole something of yours. You really want the truth? The truth is Humans were never meant to sustain the balance in the Realm. You, Reeve, your father, Will; all of you are poison. We are the Realm's response to the sickness which began in Paradise."

"Mankind learns from their mistakes. My father knew we had no place here, but he also had the big picture in mind, because something went terribly wrong in this Realm. You're all likely what was left of the Humans who the Realm deemed unworthy of her land. You're not a response, you're a condition.

"I am no Human!", Ort screeched, grabbing Steven with his long, rough tail. "How dare you compare me to your despicable kind!", drooling over him.

"Asporas have lived and died in the Tunnels for a long time, Steven," Gor clarified.

"Relative to you. But Time doesn't even prefer to move down here."

"That's nonsense," came from one Aspora.

"What did he say?", another asked.

"He said Time doesn't like it down here!", Ort repeated.

The Asporan laughter shook the cave, drool dripping down from their fangs, some short, some broken. The surrounding plants responded by retracting into the wall.

~

Reeve had been crawling the entire distance Steven walked, torch in mouth, and he let his face collapse into the mud. The Fire laid there illuminating the dark Tunnel as he too lied there, exhausted.

"This...is...so much harder...with arms," he spoke, panting staring at the Fire. The sound of the Asporas' laughing at Steven's comment echoed to Reeve's position. "Okay, fine. You want it, you got it, Fire," grabbing hold of the torch, holding it close to his face. "I'm reckless, there I said it. I run when I shouldn't. I...I'm selfish. I put others down, because I realized a long time ago, I must have put myself down. Oh shit. I put myself down."

~

The Asporas all collectively slowed their laughter, and Gor squinted at Steven, her terrible eyesight causing her to miss a key detail to Steven's get up. "Interesting," Gor said lifting the rope's end with her tail to feel it.

"What?", Steven said, grabbing it.

"Ort, you didn't feel it necessary to mention this?"

“Uh,” Ort murmured trying to get a visual. “What?”

“The rope around his waist, you imbecile!”

“I don’t know. I can’t *see* well!”

“Yeah, just like you can’t see that ridiculous vest you’ve been wearing.”

“I like the way it makes me feel!”

~

“What more do you want from me?!” Reeve pleaded, shaking the Fire. “I’m sorry I burnt the forest down on Mt. Sôr! I’m sorry, I caused disorder in the Desert over their drought. I didn’t know!”

The Fire glowed brightly.

“I don’t know what you mean! I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Reeve declared before collapsing in the mud again. “I don’t know if I’m even Human anymore.”

~

“What’s the big fuss over the rope anyway?”, an Aspora asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? The Grey Ray must’ve been on the other side of it!”, another clarified.

“Oh,” Ort realized.

“Oh?”, Gor repeated. “You moron! He’s probably been out there, listening this whole time!”, Gor turned back to face Steven, gritting his fangs and growling towards him. “You distracted me again. He knows our location!”

~

“I can’t find Steven!”, Reeve cried. “I don’t know if he was kidnapped or I don’t know if he left me, and I deserve it,” he said, looking back at the Fire. “What I do know, is I’m tired of looking at you, being reminded of all the mistakes I can’t even remember I made,” he shouted, grabbing the Fire tightly, standing to his feet and launching it into the darkness of the Tunnel ahead of him.

Far from where Reeve stood, the Fire laid alone for only a moment. The bioluminescent plants from inside the Asporan Tunnel glowed along the wall of the pathway from the Fire to Reeve. He was mesmerized by them, drawn to their light. His eyes glowed with each passing plant he stared at so intently.

“Woah.”

Reeve slowly bent to pick up the Fire, still fixated on the plants surrounding them. “This is crazy, right?”, he said to the Fire. Reeve came to a realization when he did a double take at the Fire. “My feet!”, he exclaimed, his eyes shooting down to his lower half. “Ha-ha!”

Reeve looked ahead at the trail of his new bioluminescent friends, and zipped off excitedly along them into the dark, Fire in hand.

~

“Looks like we’ll be adding you to the collection sooner than later, Steven.”

Reeve appeared just outside the entrance of the cave. “There he is! Thanks, guys,” he said acknowledging the plants. “Wait here, Torchy. I don’t want you to get hurt,” he said, sticking the into the wall.

As soon as Gor and her minions were about to devour Steven whole, Reeve took in a deep breath and got into a running stance, leaning down to one of the glowing plants, “Let’s turn down the lights a bit,” he whispered.

Across the dome of the cave the plants dimmed in response to Reeve.

Steven felt a gust of wind pass him, along with words whispered, “hold your breath,” in Reeve’s voice from just behind him. The sound appeared for only a second before it seemed to trail away. Steven took in a deep breath.

All around them, a strong wind picked up. Unable to see much at all, the Asporas could only feel the force of Reeve circling them at an incredibly speed. Suddenly, the Asporas began gasping for air. A smaller one began to walk towards the exit to escape the vortex, but collapsed after growing dizzy.

“What’s...going on,” one said before losing consciousness.

“There’s a strong...wind in here.”

“I...can’t...smell a th-thing!”, Ort said shaking his head.

The Asporas slowly lifted into the air, reaching for the ground to keep their balance. Gor gripped tight to the floor with her many legs, Steven still caught in her constricted tail. She grew dizzy from the lack of oxygen, the little eyesight she had at all fading from her. Steven paid close attention and as soon as she lost focus, her tail loosened enough for him to escape her clutches.

“No!”, she screamed, trying to grab Steven, as his body rose into the air. Reeve was running too fast to slow down and Steven was too high up to reach the ground. Gor, crawled close to the ground, fighting the grey vortex. She made her way to its edge and whipped her tail, tripping Reeve. At the speed he had reached, Reeve went flying high into the air. Steven and the other Asporas then fell to the floor as Reeve’s body stuck there, imprinted into the side of wall.

“Did it work?”, Reeve said, grabbing his head.

“Get him!”, Gor shouted, pointing to Reeve’s stuck body.

Steven raced the creatures to his friend, running up the side of the wall. The Asporas, being naturally born wall crawlers, scuttled up behind Steven. Reaching Reeve first, Steven slapped him to return his consciousness.

“We gotta go!”

Luckily for Reeve’s reflexes, he leapt over the approaching Aspora, grabbed the slack left in the rope tied around his waist, throwing it around his upper jaw and began riding the Aspora like a bull. “Yeehaw!” he sarcastically exclaimed fighting the other Asporas from his saddle. Any of them who got too close was kicked to the ground by Reeve as Steven led the way up the wall until they reached the top of the dome.

The Aspora fought Reeve the entire time, “Woah, girl, woah!”

“Geth offa meh,” the Aspora screamed through the rope tied around his mouth.

“Okay,” Reeve shouted proudly, leaping off, striking him on the back of his head, sending the Aspora down to a crowd of them. As soon as he hopped off, Steven, standing completely vertical on the roof of the dome, quickly reached his hand out to grab hold of Reeve so he didn’t plummet into the hoard of enemies waiting below.

“Wow,” Steven said, surprised. “You don’t weigh a thing.”

“More light than man,” Reeve said, flexing.

“You can’t wait up there forever, Steven,” Gor exclaimed.

Reeve stared down at the Fire left in the exit. “You think you could swing me over, then?”, Reeve asked Steven. “We’ve gotta get them to lead us outta here.”

“Ort,” Gor shouted. “Climb up there and grab them.”

“I don’t wanna get a sonic kick to the face too,” Ort complained.

Steven swung Reeve back and forth until he gained enough momentum to throw him over the conversing Asporas back to the Fire’s position. They all turned to face Reeve as he pulled the Fire out of the wall. Every Aspora approached him angrily, ready to tear apart the man who’s caused them so much misery. As fast as he could manage, Reeve split the torch apart into the arrows Tara had constructed it from and threw an arrow at Ort’s vest who was standing in the center of them. He caught fire and immediately began panicking, but more so over the quality of his clothes

“Hey. My favorite vest!”

“Put him out!”, Gor shouted before leering at Steven with a distasteful expression. She crawled up the side of the dome after him.

The Asporas gathered around Ort and stomped him into the dirt, trying to quell the fire, but nothing worked. “It’s not going out! Why isn’t the fire going out?!” an Aspora claimed.

“Ow! Ow! St—stop! It’s not working!”, Ort screamed, pushing them all back, running passed Reeve, towards the exit.

All of them gritted their nasty fangs at Reeve who smiled back and took off, running too fast for them to smell where he was going, as he stuck a flaming arrow in each of their backsides, where they couldn't reach. Each Aspora caught fire, screaming for help, and they too panicked and ran to the exit.

Gor was focused on getting to Steven as he ran down to meet up with Reeve on the floor. The two of them followed the blood curdling screams coming from the enflamed Asporas. Suddenly, a light came into view; the end of the tunnel. With no concern for the fall, Asporas leapt out of it to reach the Ocean waters down below. Reeve and Steven stopped quickly at the end and looked down at the massive drop beneath them, the Comfort Zone laying in shambles, pieces jutting out of the waves, crashing against them.

Steven looked over the edge of the opening while tying the two split pieces of rope back together tightly. "Reeve?"

Reeve couldn't help from facing Gor nightmarishly approaching them at a swift pace and said with a shaky voice, "Yeah?"

"Thank you for losing so much weight," Steven said before leaping backwards out of the exit. Reeve looked down to see the rope attached to him was being fed out the opening rather quickly.

Gor pounced at Reeve, and was just inches from him before being pulled back and dragged out of the Tunnel over the edge. Gor's momentum gave her no time to stop, as she soared over the edge, falling to the depths again. Just outside of the exit of the Asporan Tunnel, Steven stood on the edge of the wall, Reeve hanging from his friend's waist.

"Ha-ha!", Reeve cheered. "Sidewalker!"

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