



Spacetime

After Reeve and Steven safely climbed their way back into the Asporan Tunnels, they followed the bioluminescent plants which sprouted up with each few feet they traversed. They'd been following them for a good while now.

“Wonder where they come from?”, Reeve asked, touching one of them as it retracted into the wall.

“Who knows where anything comes from around here. My guess is they have something to do with the souls of the Humans who were swallowed up by the ground. Maybe they're the ones leading us somewhere.”

“Well, I'd like to get out of these foul smelling Tunnels sooner than later. I've spent enough time here.”

“Well, Time doesn't—”

“Ok, I'm sure the Archer was just exaggerating about that,” Reeve said, rolling his eyes.

“What? What's so hard to believe?”

“*Time* doesn't like it down here? Really? I mean, who the heck is Time to think it, or he or she I guess, gets to decide where it, or he or she should go?”

“What, so Time has to follow the rules? You certainly don't.”

“I'm Human...I think. I get a choice.”

Steven pondered something as he stared longingly at each passing plant. “Tara knew with Paradise closing, we wouldn't make it to the entrance of the Tunnels by taking the Desert route.”

“Yeah.”

“But, I've also heard Time and Space are essentially one in the same.”

Reeve looked at Steven with an empty stare, blinked and said, “That doesn't make any sense.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” Steven said, shrugging. He watched the bioluminescent glow pulsate through the leaf intently. “But...my father told me about this theory a Human came up with a long time ago...”

“You're in the Realm, Steven. This isn't exactly Earth. The rules are different out here.”

“But we are somewhere...right? I mean, in a sense the theory holds true, Space and Time *are* one in the same; Spacetime. So, we just need to know where we're headed. Since Time doesn't prefer to move at all down here, then why should Space? We should be able to get anywhere we desire as long as we know what we want.”

“You know, I don’t remember if I took any physics classes, but I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“The Garden is on the other side of the Desert, right?”, Steven clarified. “Tara told me people are disappearing when they enter it, but let’s say we don’t try to enter it. What if the Garden comes to us?”

Reeve paused for a moment, “Did you drink Cactus Juice?”

“What? No!”

“You holding out on *me*?”

“Reeve, I’m just saying! It’s not that crazy. Anyone who tries to enter the Garden does so to reach Paradise. But we’re in search of something else?”

“Flowers?”

“The truth,” Steven said, grabbing Reeve by the arm, stopping him from walking any further. “I mean why would this massive forest just start growing as if from nowhere soon after the Asporas stole the last place left for mankind along the Path.”

A vine sprouted next to one of the plants on the wall of the Tunnel, and slithered down towards Reeve and Steven.

“I don’t know!” Reeve admitted. “I can say that now if that helps. I mean, I tried getting in there once.”

“You what?”

“Well, I mean, why not? Everyone else was trying.”

“And disappearing!”

“Yeah, but I’m different,” Reeve went on as the vine sprouted leaves while growing closer and closer. It touched Reeve’s foot, but continued to move right past. “So, I tried.”

“Why didn’t you bring it up?”

“I um...didn’t make it through.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know! I was pushed out. Even with my speed I could feel a strong force pushing me back and I couldn’t even open my eyes. There’s some mysterious power in there I don’t want to mess with, which is why I didn’t wanna come down *here*. I’m not allowed inside either.”

“Hmm, the Garden pushed you out,” Steven said, thinking out loud as the vine began to coil itself gently around Steven’s leg.

“Yes, I said that,” Reeve said returning his attention to their walk, totally unaware of the vine.

“That means either you aren’t allowed inside...or—”

Steven, yanked by the vine, fell to his face and was dragged into the wall of the Tunnel with barely enough time to shout. Reeve stopped and turned back to the absence his friend.

“Or what?”

Reeve was staring into the dark abyss of the Tunnel alone once more.

Sighing, “I hate this place.”

~

A Seed of Thought



Steven was dragged above the surface, gasping for air, the vine let go of him, placing him gently on the floor of the dense foliage surrounding him: the Garden.

“Ugh, I’m getting tired of being dragged everywhere.”

Steven looked up, and felt a tinge of fear as his stomach growled in agreement with him. Steven walked alone once again, pushing his way through the vines growing in front of him. The harder he forced his way through, the more they seemed to fight him.

“You shouldn’t be so forceful,” someone said.

Steven scanned the area. The only movement belonged to the vines growing in front of him. “What the?”, Steven said batting at them as they grew in his way.

“The Garden is filled with regret,” came the voice, reverberating as it spoke to him. “Many enter this Realm in search of something, and end up forgetting their true purpose behind it.”

“I’m just trying to get through to the Gathering Place,” Steven defended.

“You seek a destination.”

“There’s something I need to understand.”

“Well, that *need* may be a *fruitless* effort,” the Garden spoke as a vine grew above him, dropped an apple on his head, and fell into his hand.

“Ow.”

Steven examined it and recognized the bite marks in the apple from before he threw it at the Break in frustration. “You forgot something”, the Garden spoke as Steven looked around, confused. “You should finish what you started, Steven.”

“What?”

“You’re worried.”

“I’m not,” Steven said.

“What’s on the other end of the Garden? How long will you be alone without Reeve? Or how about the Asporas? Where did they really come from?”

“You know him by his real name?”

“The Garden may possess all information about the Grey Ray. I am of *every* thought ever shared in this Realm,” the Garden said as Steven noticed the life around him moving and glowing. “Most fade from the brain around here; either they’re too frightening or unnecessary. Here in the Realm, thoughts can’t just disappear into nothingness. Nothing can really. And so, they all end up here. Like your apple.”

“You must have been here a while.”

“When the Realm began to grow sick, the Garden sprouted from the seed of a single mind; a thought so strong it could last lifetimes. The life in the Garden is watered by the minds of all who’ve ever existed in the Realm. A creative thought helps the Garden grow, and a destructive thought aids the Garden in its strength. The remaining light from Paradise shines on all of it, so it may continue to thrive and protect others from being misled.”

“That’s precisely why I’m here. I have to find the truth,” Steven said, beginning to leave. “There’s so much pulling me there.”

Steven suddenly felt something pull at his ankle. He looked down to see another vine wrapped around it and groaned. Just then he was lifted in the air by his foot and held upside down.

“There is much more you are not prepared for, child. So much more beyond the Path, beyond Paradise,” the Garden said in a heavier tone. Steven was eye level with the apple he just dropped on the ground. “You believe you have the knowledge to help others?”

“I’ll be fine,” Steven responded, attempting to grab what was left of the fruit.

“You fear change.”

“What?”, grabbing the apple. “Of course not.”

“Before entering the Desert, you told Reeve you could do it on your own.”

“Well...yeah...but—”

“Fear is a natural Human reaction. Fear of change however is odd because change is a fundamental part of life.”

“You’re a forest. Humans move all over the world. How could you understand?”

“I wouldn’t go so short as to say so. My roots extend far across the Realm. With the knowledge I possess from others, I’ve traveled further than all of Humanity. You wish to reach the Gathering Place, which is only meant for those who wish to get into Paradise. Unfortunately, the once humble town is no more, sunken into the depths of the Realm.”

Steven thought hard as the blood rushed down to his head. He munched on the rest of his apple to help him think. “You said you know of all thoughts that have entered the Realm,” Steven confirmed with his mouth full.

“Even the ones lost to the Fiends.”

“But I haven’t had the thought yet. You don’t know what I’m going to do when I get to the Gathering Place as much as I don’t know,” he said, gobbling down on the apple. “I only seek knowledge.”

“One’s intentions may spawn from their past thoughts.”

“I’m *trying* to change. Before I entered the Realm, all I wanted to do was reach Paradise. I guess I thought my father might be there. I think I’m destined for something else now. Whatever happens next, I want to share the knowledge of the Realm with all those beyond it.”

Before Steven knew it, the vines had grown tight around his legs and lifted him above the tree tops. He looked ahead of the Path and saw a dim light at the bottom of a deep, wide cavern.

“It’s down there,” Steven said to himself, finishing most of the apple, leaving just the seeds and stem. He felt the tightness around his legs weaken just before he fell through the tree branches. He struck almost every branch on the way down. “Ow! Ow!”, he blurted with his mouth wide enough to accidentally swallow the rest of the apple, nearly choking on his way down. He was saved from hitting the ground when the vines suddenly tightened around his ankle, then immediately they snapped and dropped him.

“What’s wrong?“, Steven asked, coughing as he slowly stood up.

“We’re losing light. Paradise can hear you. She knows someone is coming for her. ”

“Wait, I can save you! I don’t want Paradise for myself. Please! You’ve been so helpful to me. I don’t exactly know where your face is, but if I could look you in the eyes, I’d thank you.”

The Garden sprouted two bright blue flowers from its vines which wrapped the moss along the trunk of one of its trees. Steven was able to make out a somewhat familiar face to him.

“Steven, it’s okay”, the Garden spoke as it moved the vines to mimic a mouth speaking. Steven looked around as the rest of the Garden began to retract.

“But, this isn’t fair. I wanna know more! Tell me more!”

“I’m sorry, Steven. It was never meant for you to reach the Gathering Place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Paradise...needs you. I can’t help anymore. If I have caused you any pain, or discomfort, know it was only meant to help you.”

“What’s at the end? What do I do next?”

The Garden spoke no more as the flowers lost color, wilted and fell to the floor. The trees surrounding him began to shrink and lose their leaves. Steven fell to his knees, weeping. His tears dripped slowly and with each droplet, a tiny blade of grass grew from its tiny puddle. As the Garden’s life slowly retracted all around him, the vines lifted off a torn sign that read: HE GATHERING PLAC_.

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Sunken

Steven walked alone again. His environment was growing more grim and dark as he approached the great chasm of what was once the Gathering Place. The homes still standing were all beaten and torn apart, bending towards where everything began to sink. The life leftover from the Garden was spilling over into the Gathering Place. Vines and ferns overgrew the walls and fractured pieces of wood, with moss peaking through the openings. There were whole ecosystems making a living in the walls. Yet, Steven could see they were all retracting slowly since the Garden faded.

Steven looked down a deep chasm. Spiraling downward was what remained of the Path, and at the very center was a speck of light. It appeared quite small, but the energy it was giving off was far greater. He could feel its warmth from far above the spiral.

“Wow,” Steven uttered to himself.

“You!”

Steven spun around quickly to see an older woman leaving one of the only homes remaining intact. She had sharp, ridged horns growing from the top of her head, curving backward. There was all kinds of life growing from her; mushrooms sprouting from her horns, skin, hair, and backside. Bent at the top of her spine, she used a cane to prop herself up. Her eyes and body withered from living in her unique living situation.

“Get away from there!”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“How dare you enter the Gathering Place! Humans aren’t allowed here anymore!”

“My name is Steven. My father—”

“I don’t care *who* you are! Your mind is too dangerous.”

“I’m only here for knowledge.”

“Ah, but knowledge is the most dangerous weapon, child! I am Cleo, the Horned One. My people are educators, but as more Humans entered the Realm, famously known for being terrible listeners, I became the last of my kind,” she said.

“My father, William, led the construction of the Comfort Zone.”

“I know! I can see it in your face,” she said, gesturing for him to follow her into her home, away from the light. He walked close to her as she went on, “That bridge once served a fine purpose.”

“I’ve heard it was a place for us to feel safe after what happened here,” Steven asked as he entered her home. It was overgrown with plant life, retracting through the cracks in the wall. She didn’t seem as concerned about them with Steven in her home.

“Partial credit. See, long before all this life wrapped the Gathering Place, there was no Garden. There was no Path. No area deemed separate from the rest. It was all one, and mankind was a part of that. It was beautiful.

“It seems most blame us for poisoning it.”

“Ah. But you see it was not the Humans who were poisoning the Realm. It was their minds. Someone, or something, must’ve poisoned them with ill thoughts. It wasn’t until the land took action that things really began to change. The land swallowed the Humans entering the Realm who it deemed unworthy. That was our first warning. Paradise was planning something. Like all others in this Realm, she was getting fed up with mankind. As soon as the last honorable Human entered Paradise, the land began to devise a plan.”

Steven was listening intently.

“Paradise could not destroy itself, and she could not move. So she planned to hide. The light we see from her began to shrink, and the entrance to her grounds shrunk to a fraction of the head of a pin. She could not move, and still she remains hidden at the end of the Path.”

“The speck of light!”, Steven said, standing to attention.

She looked up at Steven and smiled. “Child. You can *never* pass through to Paradise. A man who came here with his wife thought he would be safe. He lost sight of Paradise and it began to hide from him as his intentions were not pure. It is said he wished to be the first to reach Paradise’s end. To conquer it in his name.”

Steven sat down to listen more intently.

“Soon enough, his wife and Paradise itself had disappeared from his eyes, and he was willing to do anything to get her back. He gave in; just like every other Human, this side of the Realm.”

“The Fiends.”

“No one had seen them before. Most believe they were spawned from the bitter souls of the Humans who were swallowed up by the land. This man was the first to speak with them. And he wept. Felt as though he’d never see his bride again.”

“Why talk to them at all?”

“No one knew what the Fiends were capable of when they appeared. They promised him, once his emotions had settled into the Realm, he would be able to pass through to Paradise. The only thing which settled into the Realm was his body.”

“So, he made it through? How?!”

“He never tried.”

“What?! Why not at least try to make it through?!”

“He was willing to do anything to enter Paradise’s grounds again. Regardless of his own soul, his mind was ill, and so, the Fiends took everything Human away from him. Soon enough, it was as though he didn’t care at all anymore. And so what’s left of Paradise remains a speck of light, unbroken by Human again.”

“So, there is a way through.”

“Weren’t you listening?”

“Yes, and thank you. I have to go back to—”

Suddenly she was standing in front of Steven, preventing him from leaving.

“You cannot. You want to share Paradise like your father; that is what you want, no?”

“I just want everyone to know the truth. They deserve it. Too many people have been lost to Paradise, and too many more are going to fail trying.”

“You cannot return to the Human world! You will poison their minds with thoughts of Paradise!”

“Not if they—”

She spun him around to look him in the eyes.

“They will not listen to your *reason*, only your *words*! They will return by the hundreds and ruin our Realm all over again in search of where Paradise is hiding.”

“Paradise may be hiding. But, you don’t know what she wants. What she’s waiting for.”

“I know *everything*!”

“That’s what Reeve thought,” Steven said with a smirk.

Cleo’s facial expression changed dramatically.

“You’ve been traveling with the *Grey Ray*?”

“He’s the reason I made it this far at all.”

“*He* is the *reason* I still remain here.”

“What?”, Steven said before realizing, “Wait...is he—?”

“Where is Reeve?!” she said, standing tall, intimidating Steven as her horns began to grow and bend.

“Not here.”

“Yes he is,” she said striking her cane against the ground. Violet light emitted from the base of it, ran towards the grip, and the handle of the cane rounded off into a dark circle. She pushed passed Steven and left her home. “Reeve!”, she shouted into the dark abyss of the Gathering Place. “Where are you!”

“He’s not here,” Steven repeated.

“I should have guessed he’d use another Human to sneak his way in,” she said before spinning her cane and striking the ground with it. Light waves emitted from the base and the ground began to glow dimly as the plant life grew back again.

“He’s on the other side of the Garden,” Steven clarified, “He can’t pass through.”

“You passed through, didn’t you? The Garden doesn’t let anyone through, and somehow you did. What did you tell it?”

“Look, I was just trying to figure out how to get us to the Gathering Place.”

“NO! The only reason I remain here is to *protect* Paradise from him. He was selfish and she deemed him unworthy. Why do you think he was kicked out?! Just give Reeve an opening and he’ll take it. Thanks to you, he’s got a better chance than ever.” The mystical woman’s eye caught what was happening around her. She knelt down and could sense the plants were retracting from the absence of something else. “What did you say to the Garden?”

“Not...much.”

“Humans. You never listen,” she said, tapping the tip of her cane to her horns. The cane turned to a swirl of violet lights that began to wrap her body and change her shape. Her body mass grew and grew until she took the shape of a Buffalo. She got to all fours and charged Steven rapidly with intention to gore him.

“WOAH!”, Steven dodged her attack as she broke through the front of her home. He got his footing and shouted ahead. “Stop!”

“Why should I? You didn’t.”

The Buffalo charged again.

“Augh!”, Steven screamed as he was chased upstairs. He got a hold of himself and hid in one of the rooms to catch his breath.

“Come on out, Steven,” she said, after altering back to a Human. “You have the honor of being the last real Human to try to reach Paradise.” Steven could make out her Human footsteps alongside the tapping of her heavy cane.

“Oh god, oh god,” Steven repeated to himself.

He hid under a bed in the room. As soon as he had reached safety, it grew quiet. The Beetle, of whom he conversed with early on the Path, appeared next to him under the bed.

Steven was relieved saying, “Hey, it’s you!”

“Hello again,” the Beetle said before tapping her horn twice on the ground and the violet light emitting from the tip took over her body, and she began to grow again. As Cleo took a new shape, the bed began to lift off her. When the light faded, she was no longer the harmless Beetle, but a Mammoth with incredibly massive tusks, staring Steven down.

“Mammoth,” Steven said, disappointed.

Cleo let out a trumpet cry and stomped the ground. The sound of creaking wood led them both to the realization the floor wasn’t about to support them much longer. Steven took off and stood on the wall.

“What?!” the stunned shapeshifter shouted as the floor collapsed, sending her through it. During Steven’s attempt to run away up the wall, she reached out her trunk and pulled him down with her.

“Augh!”, Steven screamed, as his body rag dolled in the trunk of this great beast. Cleo lost her grip and Steven was whipped threw a window into the next house, landing on the wall of one of its rooms.

“Ow,” he said reaching his feet, standing sideways once again.

“SO!”, Cleo’s voice boomed from the bottom of the last home. “The Garden blessed you with one of its fruits. No matter. You may move differently than Reeve, but you can’t hide from me like he can.”

Steven looked for a new room and locked all the doors. He caught his breath and grabbed the nearest weapon he could find; the sliver of a broken mirror.

“Oh wow, I shoulda stayed home. What was the Garden saying?”

“Change!”, a familiar voice said.

“Who’s there?”

Steven thought and looked down at the piece of broken mirror he was using as a weapon. In it, he saw his reflection with a much more serious expression, which repeated. “Change!”

“Augh!”

“Oh, don’t tell me I’m scared of my own reflection,” Other Steven said.

“No, it was just startl—”

“Did I say I could speak?!”

“No,” Steven responded.

“No, what?”

“No, Sir?”

“Now me, listen to me!”, Other Steven began, “I didn’t come all the way out here, after learning to shift the Realm’s perspective, be dragged across the Desert, spend Time (or not) in those stench filled Asporan tunnel, only to have *me* chicken out!”

“I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“Stop it! I’m just apologizing to myself now. The only reason I’m scared I won’t make it into Paradise is because I know I won’t. Even Dad couldn’t.”

Steven said nothing.

“But,” Other Steven said, “it looks like Reeve can.”

Steven nodded. Other Steven had a point.

“Or could. I think there may be a reason Paradise isn’t gone *yet*. It’s far too tight a squeeze for either of us, but Reeve *could* pass right through.”

“I don’t know.”

“Paradise is closing, Steven. What am I going to do?”

“Hey,” Reeve said, suddenly next to him.

“Augh!”, Steven shouted, attacking him with the mirror, which Reeve stopped his hand immediately before it reached his face.

“What’s going on? Why are you so sweaty? Are you talking to yourself again?”

“Shh!”, Steven whispered, grabbing Reeve’s mouth. “There’s a crazy—how did you get here?”

Reeve moved Steven’s hand, “The Garden’s gone.”

“Gone?!”

A pair of long, ridged horns ripped through the door and pried it off like a crow bar. Standing in front of them was a very upset looking Ibex; a goat-like creature, staring them down with its rectangular pupils.

“Split!”, Steven shouted. They both screamed as Cleo charged and separated them from each other. Taking off hastily, Reeve’s speed lit the brittle wood of the house as Steven ran up the wall and leapt through a window. The house they broke out of began to engulf in flames due to the weak structure and decaying plant life.

Reeve reappeared outside, watching his friend being chased to the spiraling entrance of Paradise. Steven ran down the wall of the chasm and Cleo followed close behind, leaping along the wall freely as Ibexes do. Reeve shot out in front of her, flashing his grey complexion brightly. Blinded, she lost her footing and fell off the wall. She nearly disappeared from sight until the violet light from her horns began to illuminate after she struck them against the wall twice. She changed back to a Beetle and was flying back up.

“I have sworn to protect Paradise from mankind,” she shouted in a shrill beetle voice, before turning back to her Human form and stood in front of Paradise’s entrance. “More importantly, I am sworn to protect her from you, Reeve.”

“Listen lady, I don’t know what your problem is with me, but I can tell you this: I am no man.”

“You were hardly one before the Fiends did the rest of the work.”

“I’ve settled just fine around here.”

“Your ‘abilities’ are merely the sickness within your mind overtaking your body. Humans were never meant to live in the Realm; Paradise has made that very clear.”

“Steven!”, Reeve shouted back at his friend while glaring at Cleo. “What’s with the speck she’s guarding?”

“It’s Paradise’s entrance. I think someone is waiting for you.”

Reeve smiled and ran towards the light. Cleo struck her cane in the ground in front of him, blocking Paradise’s entrance. She absorbed the Grey Ray through the top circle on her cane, lifted it, and shot him back out through the bright tip.

Reeve took form out of the light as he landed back above the chasm.

“Did I make it?”

Cleo smiled, “Don’t you get it? Paradise used to be a great and lustrous land until you and many others took advantage of her. She doesn’t want you there. Her doors will soon be closed forever.”

“Not until I get there,” Reeve said.

As Cleo absorbed Paradise’s energy through the dark hole, she channeled it through the bottom. Reeve dodged a series of light beams emitting from the tip of her cane. She then lifted her weapon, struck the ground aggressively, and fired a surge of energy into the ground, causing vines to shoot up and grab Reeve’s legs. As soon as the vines wrapped all the way around, they hardened and almost turned to stone.

“Legs no!”, Reeve shouted. Cleo began to fill her weapon with the light from Paradise and was ready to strike Reeve with another beam. “Oh, Realm,” Reeve repeated.

With a look of terror in Steven’s eyes, he thought fast, trying to get creative. He reached down to the wall, and gripped the dirt tightly. “Come on!”

Suddenly the vines loosened from Reeve’s legs, just in time to give him space to dodge her attack.

“All right, Sidewalker!”, Reeve cheered.

After being set free, he continued to run at her. Cleo stood her ground and with every run Reeve took at her was met with a reversal. Each attempt left Reeve back at the top of the chasm.

“Reeve!”, Steven shouted back to him after getting his footing. “You have to get a running start! You need to reach light speed if you’re gonna pass through! I’ll hold her off.”

“But—”

“Run!”, Steven screamed.

Reeve disappeared in a flash of light as the houses of the Gathering Place burned around them all.

“Look what you’ve done!”, she shouted in terror. “You’re destroying one of the last things your father built. He would be ashamed if he knew you were aiding this criminal.”

“My father left to find a home for my family. He stayed when he realized his services could be of use to others. And he’s—he’s dead now. I think my father knew something no one else did, that Paradise was incomplete. He wasn’t just protecting her; I think he needed help leading someone to it.”

“No one will enter. And you will die as well, Human,” Cleo said. “You’re sick.”

“As far as I can tell,” Steven said, lifting his hands to pull vines out of the ground. They wrapped tight around her knees and pulled her down aggressively. “You’re sick too. You think...,” lifting the vines to her arms, yanking her down further. “...that you know everything...” Lifting more. “...But how much do you really know, huh? How much of the knowledge you possess has kept you guarded. How much of the fear in your mind, and the pain of the past are you hiding? The way I see it, I’m the only thing left fighting for the truth. The truth of what really happened here.”

Reeve had run all the way back, over Mt. Sôr, along the Desert, and back to where the Comfort Zone had plummeted into the depths of the Ocean.

Gor and Ort, as natural born climbers as they were, struggled at the end of their long climb back up the side of the Path with a few more Asporas close behind. Ort was now sporting a singed denim vest.

“Okay,” Ort said struggling to keep his balance, stepping on Gor’s face. “Almost there.”

“I swear to the Realm if you step on my face one more time!”, Gor screamed.

Ort made it up to the edge and let out a sigh of relief. He looked up, squinting at the approaching flash from Reeve. It was not meant for Ort’s beady little eyes, which could barely take in much light at all. Reeve braked hard as he reached the edge of the Path. The force of his tailwind knocked the both of them off balance, and Ort fell back, pushing Gor along with him into the others.

“Ray!”, the two of them shouted, plummeting again.

Without noticing their trouble, Reeve took a deep breath and got into a runner’s stance.

“I’m coming,” he whispered to someone.

Reeve shot off faster than he had ever moved before. He felt light ripping at his face, his eyes sunk far into his face, and his clothes ignited. And still, he felt as though he wasn’t moving fast enough, and so, he sped up. He skipped the deep sandy areas of the Desert, he leapt over Tara’s position on the mountain he would normally run across, and even as he felt the force of Paradise pushing him, he pushed back.

Cleo could feel Reeve approaching and had mere seconds to react. She fired a shot of light at Steven to distract him and break out of his vine’s tight bind. He was able to block the attack with the shard of glass as it reflected into the pink sky.

Upon her release, she spun her cane several times, and prepared to fire a shot at the Grey Ray. A massive single ray of violet light extended toward where Reeve would enter the spiraling entrance. Just in time, Steven threw the mirror shard in front of her, the violet light bounced off and returned, striking her horn, separating it from her head.

She screamed in pain, and at the perfect moment, Steven lifted his fist, commanding a vine out of the ground behind her. She tripped, losing her footing, and fell down the chasm. Cleo attempted to change shape, but without both horns continued falling to her demise.

Reeve was moving incredibly fast he ignited anything flammable, and then dove through the speck of light leading to what was left of Paradise.

And the light was gone.

A dark shadow descended upon the Realm’s valleys, and suddenly Steven felt a chill grow over his body.

“Sleep well,” Steven whispered.