**Unexpected Expedition**

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/930.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | General (non relationship-focused) |
| Fandom: | PEAK (Video Game) |
| Characters: | Original Character(s), Original Child Character(s), Original Non-Binary Character(s), Scoutmaster Myres (PEAK), Zombie (PEAK) |
| Additional Tags: | Airplane Crashes, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff and Angst, Mountains, Climbing, Wilderness Survival, Blood and Injury, Trauma, Everyone is Alive, Everyone Needs a Hug, Eventual Happy Ending, Canon Compliant, Nightmares, Body Horror, Found Family, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Near Death Experience |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 1 of Conquering the PEAK |
| Stats: | Published: 2026-11-01 Completed: 2026-11-02 Words: 100,148 Chapters: 33/33 |

# Unexpected Expedition

by cptsubby


Summary

A group of four scouts take flight to Hawaii on Bing Bong Airlines on the exact same flight that left another group of scouts stranded in the past. Will these scouts make it to Hawaii, or will history be doomed to repeat itself?


Notes

See the end of the work for notes

# Chapter 1: The Airport

*June 4th, 2026*

Bing Bong Airlines was not Riley's first choice for a flight, considering the reputation that preceded it, but they needed any flight that they could get to Hawaii. The high possibility of a cheap flight crashing would not stop them from getting some sunshine and finishing the last few badges for their sash.

Not long after they walked into the airport, they decided to stand in front of the massive mirror in the lobby. For what reason, they didn't really know, but it never hurt to make sure they seemed okay. After all, first impressions meant everything, and they didn't want to look like a mess to whoever they'd come across.

Their skin was light blue, which many said makes them stand out a lot. They were wearing an aviator hat, a dark brown trench coat with a lighter brown accent, and similarly colored boots and gloves. Beneath their hat were bangs that rode just above the tops of their eyes. They had a smart watch nestled right above their right glove. Draped across their trench coat was a sparkly silver sash that only Wolf Scouts wore. It had nearly every badge on it, but there were a few open spots remaining.

The trench coat was a questionable choice, considering they were flying to Hawaii, but they thought they looked cool in it. If it became unbearable to wear, they did have a tank-top on underneath it.

It seemed that Riley would not be alone on their flight, as there were three other scouts in various parts of the airport, all in varying experiences and sizes. Maybe they could get to know each other in Hawaii, but for now, Riley wanted some alone time. That wouldn't stop them from gathering some intel on their peers though. After returning to their seat, Riley decided to scout out the three scouts.

The first scout to catch Riley's attention happened to be the least experienced *and* the youngest of the bunch.

Their skin was orange, and they wore one of the typical outfits that most newbie scouts wore: an orange button-up shirt with a green skirt. They had freckles blotted across their face, much like Riley, and they looked both nervous and excited. Their hair was both curly and not very well kept. It wasn't *dirty* by any means, just… not well loved, it seemed. Atop of their hair sat a cute little beret matching the colors of their outfit.

There were a couple badges, basically the free ones, carefully stitched onto their navy-blue sash—

Wait… *navy-blue*? Only kids that were just Scouts wore those, and if they were just a Scout… why were they here?

Never mind that. Maybe Riley would find out later.

The orange scout was near the mirror, nervously pacing back and forth, likely muttering reassuring words to themselves. They seemed to be very anxious about the trip. Riley wasn't sure if they should approach them or not, maybe put them at ease.

They didn't have time to capitalize on that though since the orange scout's eyes quickly met Riley's in the mirror. Riley quickly looked over towards the other scouts, hoping that kid didn't notice. They weren't really in the mood for a confrontation over that.

The second scout, who was purple, was the complete opposite of the first. While they did not have as many badges as Riley, it was evident that they at least had *some* experience under their belt. That put Riley at a bit of ease. They could handle one newbie, but multiple? That was surely a recipe for disaster.

Riley determined that they were a Kangaroo Scout, based on the red sash that they wore. They seemed to be quite short, somehow even shorter than the orange scout. In spite of that, they appeared to be the oldest of the bunch. They were wearing a floral shirt and khaki shorts, with aviator glasses and a sun hat fitted nicely atop their head. Much like Riley, they had some bangs as well, but it was evident that theirs was more maintained.

They were entertained by what was going on above them, which prompted Riley to look in the same direction.

They spotted a yellow scout, and the final one, that appeared to be getting angry at the rock climbing wall *while* holding onto it. They were a Rabbit Scout, as indicated by their yellow sash. They appeared to be between the other two scouts in age, though they were a few inches taller than both of them. They were wearing climbing gear, fingerless gloves and a crab head. Underneath that crab head seemed to be somewhat spiky hair, though it was difficult to tell based on the angle.

Based on their attire, it seemed like they were the only person that was actually prepared for the trip, minus the crab head. That was a rather peculiar choice. Riley wasn't really in a place to judge though, given they were wearing a trench coat.

They caught a quick glance at Riley and gave them an ugly look, to which Riley immediately looked away. At least Riley was able to confirm the kid's hair was spiky.

Since Riley last saw the orange scout, they had stepped away from the mirror and towards the miniature basketball court. They were bouncing a basketball against the wall and appeared to have eased up a little bit. Whatever they told themselves must have worked.

At least Riley would have one less high-strung kid to deal with on the flight.

Riley took a look at their watch: 10:28AM.

Plenty of time for a catnap.

Their seat wasn't exactly comfortable, but it would do the job just fine. They started to wriggle into a more tolerable position until they noticed something orange out of the corner of their eye.

The orange scout had been hovering nearby without saying a word, observing Riley's every move.

Awkward.

Riley met their gaze with their own. "Uh, hey…? Is there something on my face?"

"O-Oh! Sorry!" The orange scout saluted. "Scout, uh… Orange, r-ready for duty!" Their arm was noticeably tense.

Riley rose from their seat and returned the salute. "Wolf Scout Riley. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Orange."

They dropped their arm back to their side, but noticed that Orange didn't do the same. "Uh… you can put your arm down now."

Orange did not move.

Were they not aware of the saluting etiquette?

Riley sighed. "At ease." Orange finally complied.

The same question from earlier returned to the forefront of Riley's mind: *why were they here*? Scouts usually weren't allowed to venture out on their own until they were at least a Rabbit Scout, so what was Orange doing here, in Bing Bong Airlines of all places? And why such a young scout, of all people?

Something seemed off. Riley couldn't quite pinpoint *what*, though.

They didn't really have time to mull over this concern, since Orange had started gushing about… something. They were speaking far too fast for Riley to really make out anything, though they seemed to be very excited about it. Riley couldn't help but crack a smile.

"Orange. Please. Slow down." Riley immediately regretted how they said that. Orange immediately deflated at Riley's demand. "It's cool that you're excited and all, but just slow down a bit, okay?" Orange nodded, but they never actually continued. They instead started picking at a random scab on their arm.

Rather than convincing them to continue, Riley instead took this as an opportunity to find some answers.

They knelt down to Orange's eye level. "Hey, Orange." Orange perked up. "I've got a few questions if you don't mind answering them." Orange gave a hesitant nod.

"Right, so what is a regular old Scout like yourself doing without your troop? You really shouldn't be taking trips without your troop until you're a Rabbit Scout."

"R-Really? Uh… they– my scoutmaster said that I deserved a vacation so they sent me here. A-Alone."

A vacation? Alone?

“...okay. Do you know why they sent you to Bing Bong Airlines specifically?”

“Uh… m-my scoutmaster said… it’s the best airline to fly on…”

*And* they were lulled into a false sense of safety and cast away to a shady airline in the hopes that history would repeat itself?

“I see. And, what does your troop think of you?”

“They… I think they laugh at me behind my back. A lot of the o-other scouts… they say mean things to me… and the scoutmaster doesn’t really help me when I ask.”

Everything started to fall into place now. They weren’t treated fairly by their troop and were thrown away at the first opportunity. This wasn’t just a vacation, this was an attempt at sending them directly to their grave. What a horrible thing to do to a kid that just wanted to be a scout.

“...do you know *why* they did these things to you?”

“T-They… they said… I’m weird and t-talk too much. And that I’m… a-annoying…”

Riley didn’t know how to respond. They were just another kid, and they were being treated like shit. If Riley ever found Orange’s scoutmaster…

“Uh… i-is everything okay, Riley…?”

Riley wanted to tell them the truth, but… maybe it would be better to put them at ease, instead.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. And uh, don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on you.”

Riley ruffled Orange’s hair and gave them one final salute before turning arou– the purple scout had been watching.

Once they were spotted, they suddenly straightened up and saluted. “Ah, hello Wolf Scout Riley. I’m Kangaroo Scout Jade!” Riley silently returned the salute.

“Hello, Jade. You know it’s rude to eavesdrop, *right*?” *Great track record for being unintentionally aggressive, Riley.*

“I’m aware. Just got curious about what was going on here. I’m not really buying Orange’s story.”

So Riley wasn’t the only one with suspicions, then. “...Yeah. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Riley signaled towards the yellow scout. “So, uh… what about them over there?” They were still getting angry at the wall for some reason. Riley almost wanted to laugh, but figured it’d be rude to.

Jade let out a deep sigh. “...right. That’s Jamie. They’re my little sibling. They’re super moody, so don’t even bother with them right now. Or ever, honestly.”

Before Riley could ask Jade anymore questions, the intercom suddenly buzzed on and a tired voice came from it. “Gate 7 is now boarding. Please make your way over to Gate 7.”

Had it already been 30 minutes? Riley took a look at their watch, but it only said 10:47AM. They were actually boarding a flight early, for once? That’d be a first for any airline.

Orange darted ahead of Riley and Jade, but stopped to wave their arms. “H-Hey! We’re leaving!!”

Jade and Riley glanced at each other. “Guess we’ve got a plane to catch, huh?”

“That appears to be the case.”

Riley stepped into line right behind Orange. Riley couldn’t see their face, but based on how much they were bouncing around in their spot, they seemed excited to fly.

Riley wished they could share that same excitement. When they were younger, they enjoyed watching the clouds and the changing scenery. Now, it’s just another opportunity to take a nap.

Once Riley boarded the plane, they quickly rushed over to their seat–a window seat–and settled down. It was surprisingly comfortable. There were no mini TVs strapped to the back of the seats, but that was okay. They didn’t intend on watching anything anyways.

Orange nearly jumped into the seat beside Riley and fidgeted with their seatbelt for a moment before finally buckling themselves in.

Orange gave Riley a huge grin and leaned over to whisper in their ear. “I’m not s-supposed to sit here, but… n-nobody else is getting on, so… I’m sitting here!”

They seemed so proud of themselves. How adorable.

Riley chuckled. “Look at you, already getting yourself in trouble before we even leave.”

“…D-Don’t tell on me, please?”

“I won’t, don’t worry. Your mischief will go unnoticed.”

Orange yawned. “...okay.”

It seemed like their anxiety and excitement wore them out.

“Hey Orange. Let’s get some sleep and then we can check out Hawaii together. Does that sound good?”

Orange nodded frantically at question. If they could barely contain their excitement before, they definitely couldn’t now. “Mhm! I… I look forward to it! I’m g-gonna sleep now!”

Before Riley could respond, they were fast asleep.

Riley couldn’t help but smile. Orange wasn’t their kid, but they were still happy to be in their presence. They went through so much. It’s only fair that they finally get their lucky break.

Riley wanted to get some sleep too, so they leaned their head back and put in some earbuds to drown out the surrounding noise. The sight of white fluffy clouds and the slight turbulence of the plane made them feel drowsy.

There was a constant feeling of unease that had been tugging at Riley all morning, but they had Z’s to catch. They could worry about that later.

Everything would turn out okay. The plane wouldn’t crash. Everyone would get their badges. Everyone would get to spend time relaxing. Everyone would go home to their families and give them a hug, maybe even share stories.

Riley would just berate themselves for overthinking it when they landed. They tended to overthink sometimes. Why would it be any different this time?

After all, the same flight from the same airline wouldn’t just crash again…

Right?

# Chapter 2: Crash Landing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Riley woke up to a face full of sand and what faintly felt like a cozy fire off to their left.

Were they in Hawaii already? Why would they just be tossed in the sand and not woken up?

Orange would've definitely disturbed Riley's sleep if they made it, right?

Something seemed off.

Despite their body protesting against them, Riley tried to force themselves upward. However, they were stopped dead in their tracks by a sudden sharp pain in their right forearm.

They immediately cringed at the pain and tried to identify the source. Their eyes landed on a massive cut that pierced through their coat. The area surrounding the cut had been soaked in blood. The sand where they once rested was stained in a similar fashion.

No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't recall what actually happened leading up to the injury.

Maybe they got a little too crazy and blacked out and just didn't remember it?

No… they wouldn't ever do such a thing. They knew better than to do that, especially around children.

What happened, then?

They rolled themselves over despite the pain and couldn't believe what they saw.

It almost looked like something you'd only see in a movie.

The plane was split nearly perfectly down the middle into two pieces and had several charred marks across its body. A lot of the luggage had been sprawled out across the shore. All of the windows had been destroyed. Ironically, the wings were the last remaining pieces of the plane that were structurally sound.

That would explain the cut on their forearm, then.

A panicked voice suddenly came from behind Riley. "—iley??? R-Riley!!!"

Orange.

Orange suddenly popped into Riley's view. Their face was stained with a mix of wet sand and tears and they were desperately trying to tell Riley something, but all that came out was a

flurry of gibberish. Their entire body was erratically shaking and they seemed pretty scratched up. Their injuries weren't major, but would need to be addressed eventually.

Riley spotted a first aid kit in Orange's hands. Was Orange trying to find something to help them this whole time? Poor kid.

Orange suddenly grabbed Riley's forearm unannounced to examine it. Riley nearly yanked their arm away out of impulse, but they managed to keep their composure.

It was just Orange trying to help. There was no need to overreact.

For a brief moment, Orange struggled to roll up Riley's sleeve. Riley had considered offering assistance, but before they had a chance to, Orange managed to roll it up on their own.

The look on Orange's face was indescribable. Whatever they saw must have looked nasty. The cut didn't *feel* bad. Did it really *look* that bad?

Riley tried to speak, but they couldn't. Their throat was too dry. Instead, they offered a look of both confusion and concern towards Orange.

"Y-Your forearm… it-it's… bleeding. A lot. I'm… I'm g-gonna help you… okay?"

Riley simply nodded.

Orange grabbed the first aid kit that they had tossed to the side and pulled out some gauze and a bandage roll. They also grabbed the nearest water bottle and set it aside with the other supplies.

Riley looked at the bottle in confusion.

It seemed like Orange understood the gesture and explained. "J-Just using this to c-clean your arm before I cover it up… c-can't let it get infected!"

Riley didn't protest against what they said. They made sense, after all.

But… how much potable water did they really have?

"H-Hey, uh, Riley? I'm gonna s-start fixing you up, o-okay? L-Let me know if… if I h-hurt you at all…"

Riley hummed in acknowledgment. That hurt their throat, just a little bit.

Orange cracked open the bottle and allowed the contents to flow onto Riley's cut.

After a moment, they picked up some gauze and waved it in front of Riley. "S-So, this one, I'm g-gonna use to dry it up."

Orange dabbed the area with the gauze. Riley didn't quite see the entire thing, but from a quick glance, they saw that it was soaked in bloody water.

Huh. So maybe it *was* that bad.

Next, Orange pulled out another handful of gauze.

They paused. “...Uh, I… c-can you… are you able to h-hold this gauze in place w-when I say to?”

Riley gave them a thumbs up, partially as confirmation to Orange’s question and that their other arm actually worked.

Orange placed a wad of gauze over the cut before giving Riley a nervous gaze.

That must’ve been their cue.

Riley moved their left hand to hold the gauze in place as Orange wrapped it with a bandage.

“O-Okay, uh… I’m done! B-But, you’re thirsty, r-right? Wait here!”

Orange ran off without waiting for a response.

Riley took a look at their right arm now that Orange wasn’t hovering over them.

It was neatly wrapped in the bandage, covering whatever horrific cut lied beneath.

Orange was *really* good at first aid. Maybe Riley could find out more later, maybe even learn some new things.

Orange returned with a coconut and split it into two halves. They tried their best to split the contents in each half evenly. They put one half up to Riley’s mouth to help them drink the contents. Once Orange pulled the coconut away, they put the other half up to their own mouth to drink.

Their throat still felt like sandpaper, but the coconut did wonders. It wouldn’t hold them over forever, but it would be enough for the time being. Riley cleared their throat. Orange only waited patiently for their next move.

“Thank you, Orange. Could you tell me what happened? I… don’t really know myself.”

“T-The, uh, p-plane. It… it c-crashed. I-I don’t know where the other two are b-but w-when I saw you, I… I left to l-look for s-something to help you and I…” Orange was really trembling. “I’m so sorry I didn’t know this would happen I hope I’m not hurting you Ijustwan __”

“Breathe, Orange. I appreciate your help.” Riley forced a small smile. “I think I’ll be okay now.”

“U-Uh, are you s-sure? I, uh, I d-don’t really know how bad your cut is. I… I hope i-it’s not gonna be i-infected…”

Orange was still shaking. Riley needed to do something to calm them down. They gave Orange a reassuring pat on their arm. “I’m okay. I promise. If it was infected, I think we’d know by now. Thanks for the help. You’re really good at this stuff.”

Orange seemed to light up at the gratitude. “W-Well, uh, n-never abandon a f-friend in need, right?”

Wow, they actually paid attention to their guidebook? Not many scouts could say the same.

“Right. You know a lot for being a new scout.”

Orange rubbed the back of their neck. “U-Um, thank you… I s-studied really hard for t-this! Uh, b-being a scout, I-I mean. Not… a plane crash.” They let out an awkward chuckle.

Orange cleared their throat. “A-Anyways… i-if you feel like moving, we n-need to look f-for the others. But, uh, I already tried l-looking for t-the pilot, they’re… gone.”

“Gone?” Riley was completely dumbfounded.

“Y-Yeah. Like… like they were n-never here.”

That was… interesting, to say the least. Unfortunately, that mystery would remain unsolved for now, though. Orange made a valid point. They needed to get moving to find Jade and Jamie. Who knew where they ended up, or if they were even alive? They could’ve left to look for help, or…

No. There was no time to ruminate on those kind of thoughts. Jade and Jamie were still alive. *They had to be.*

Without another word, Orange began to move more inland. They only made it a few feet before they stopped and looked back at Riley. That appeared to be their cue. Riley slowly rose up from where they were laying before walking up to Orange’s side.

Orange looked up at Riley. “I’ll j-just, uh, f-follow you.”

Riley subconsciously grabbed Orange’s hand. “Right. Let’s go, then.” Orange lightly squeezed Riley’s hand in response.

The two of them cautiously walked inland and looked all around for any traces of Jade and Jamie.

They were instead greeted by palm trees and bushes. Some of the palm trees had coconuts dangling from them and some of the bushes had berries ripe for the picking. Riley spotted some luggage which would likely contain some supplies, but they decided against opening them. There were a few urchins and jellyfish along the mountainside, likely dangerous, so Riley made a mental note to avoid those. Beyond all of that was a mountain that they would likely have to climb. They couldn’t actually see the peak, but they assumed there was going to be a long climb ahead of them.

Riley was interested in exploring more of this island with their ragtag troop, but they needed to focus on actually finding the other half of it first.

The silence gnawed at Riley. Usually, they reveled in silence. It meant that people left them alone so they could focus on the task at hand. Now? It only allowed negative thoughts more space to manifest, and that was the last thing they needed right now.

Their curiosity about Orange gnawed at them, too. There were still a lot of questions left unanswered about them.

Riley stopped and knelt down to Orange's eye level. "Hey, Orange. You doing okay, buddy?"

If their body language was anything to go off of, then the answer was already apparent.

"N-Not really… I'm… I'm s-scared, Riley… I wanna go home…"

"...yeah. Me too. Where's 'home' for you?"

No response.

"Orange?"

"I don't… I don't actually h-have a home."

Oh.

On top of everything else, they were *homeless* too?

If—no, when—everyone got off of this island alive, Riley was going to find and strangle Orange's scoutmaster, and give Orange a place to stay. A *home*.

They deserved to have a better life. Not whatever *this* was.

"I'm sorry."

"I-It's o—"

"It really isn't okay. None of this is okay. Your troop took advantage of you and tried to *kill* you. This isn't *okay*, Orange!"

Orange recoiled from the sudden outburst and fell silent.

"Wait, Orange, I… I'm sorry for getting loud."

Orange only continued to stare at the ground.

Riley felt *horrible* for that outburst. They didn't mean to scare Orange, and yet they did anyways.

"...Orange?"

“L-Let’s go...”

Riley stood up and tried to reach for Orange’s hand again, but Orange had already tucked their hands into their pockets.

They didn’t really have time to mull over it, since some noise from behind startled them from their thoughts.

It sounded like… footsteps and muffled voices?

Riley and Orange warily looked at each other before climbing over a nearby mound to get a better view.

And what they saw were…

Two faces they never thought they’d see again.

Chapter End Notes

> Fun fact while I work on reposting this fic: I've noticed the earlier chapters are significantly shorter than the more recent ones. This is likely because of the fact I've evolved while writing this, which will become more noticeable in the later chapters (even if you ignore the length). I've considered a re-write a couple of times but I just don't have the energy for it.

# Chapter 3: Reunited...?

As Riley and Orange climbed atop the mound to identify where the sound came from, they couldn't believe their eyes. Jamie and Jade were standing just a few feet away, near the base of the mound. They were *alive*! They were slightly worse for wear, but still, alive!

Riley slid down the other side of the mound and Orange practically jumped off of it to rush over to them. Orange charged towards Jamie with their arms out, but Jamie sidestepped them and watched as they face planted in the sand. Jamie only cackled at the sight.

Orange lifted themselves up off of the ground and briefly had a look of betrayal on their face. Jade walked up to them and helped them dust the sand off of their clothes. In response, they gave Jade a hug. Jade returned the hug with no hesitation.

Jamie awkwardly coughed and crossed their arms. "So, uh, you slowpokes finally caught up! We might've left you behind if you took any longer!"

Jade rolled their eyes at Jamie and spoke up next. "Sorry for leaving you two behind. Jamie freaked out and ran off, so I was left with no choice but to follow them." Jade spotted and motioned towards the bandage on Riley's forearm. "You doing alright?"

"I'll live. What about you two?"

"I'm alright. Jamie's pretty beat up, so now we're trying to find some first aid to patch them up."

As if a switch got flipped, Orange suddenly perked up. "O-Oh! Uh, I have a f-first aid kit here f-for you!" They grabbed and proudly waved the first aid kit in front of themselves.

Jamie locked eyes with the first aid kit and grinned. "Yessss!!!! Maybe I'll live after all!"

Jade looked over at Jamie, confused. "You were never going to die in the first place…?"

Once again, Orange ran up to Jamie. They attempted to reach out to examine their injuries. Jamie reeled back almost immediately and hissed at Orange. "Has no one ever taught you what 'personal space' means?! Back off!"

Orange winced at Jamie's hostility. "I-I'm just… t-trying to help…"

Jamie looked down at Orange. They then looked over to Jade, who gave them an approving nod. They groaned. "Fine. Take a look." They extended both of their arms out towards Orange.

Orange scanned both of Jamie's arms with their eyes this time, before looking up at Jamie. "W-Well, uh, y-you have a lot of cuts on your arms, so I'll clean and c-cover those up."

They dug into the first aid kit and pulled out a handful of Band-Aids and a tube of ointment.

Jamie cringed at the sight of the Band-Aids. “What, so *they*—” They pointed at Riley. “—get a cool bandage wrapped around their arm, but I only get Band-Aids?”

“Um… Riley… has a k-kinda big cut on their arm. Y-You don’t. So… yeah. You g-get Band-Aids.”

Jamie rolled their eyes. “Whatever.”

“...do either of you have any w-water? To, uh, c-clean the cuts?”

Jamie scoffed. “We’re surrounded by water. Of course we do.”

Orange shook their head disapprovingly. “N-No… not water in the ocean… that w-will only make it worse.”

Jamie cocked their head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Uh… the w-water in the ocean… it isn’t r-really that clean. S-So… if you put that in a w-wound… it could get infected.”

Jamie and Orange looked to Jade for an answer, but they shook their head.

“Guess that’s a no, then.”

“O-Okay… that’s… okay. I’ll, uh, j-just cover them up, then…”

Silence fell across the entire group as Orange slowly ripped open each Band-Aid to put on Jamie’s arms.

Orange fell into a steady rhythm; fish out a Band-Aid, rip off the paper, put some ointment on it, stick it on a cut, put the trash back in the kit, repeat.

“A-and… done!” Orange exclaimed as they put the last Band-Aid on. They took a step back to allow Jamie to examine their work. Jamie looked Orange in the eyes and, just for a moment, their frown wavered. “Thanks, I guess.” Orange responded with a grin and a thumbs up.

“Uh, w-what about…?” Orange pointed at Jade. “I…” Jade examined themselves for any sign of injury. “...strangely enough, I’m fine. Must’ve been in a pretty good spot during the crash. Oh, and, my name is Jade.” Jade pointed over at Jamie. “And that’s Jamie. What about you?” Orange stood proudly. “I’m Orange! And this…” Orange tugged at Riley’s arm. “…is Riley!” Riley waved.

Jamie groaned. “Look, can we stop with these dumb introductions already? We have a *really* cool mountain to climb!” Jamie turned around and spread their arms out in front of the mountain. “Last one to the top is a rotten egg!” They scrambled to climb up the mountain before anyone could protest against them.

A shift in the shadows caught Riley’s attention. The sun had started to slowly creep towards the horizon. Maybe recklessly climbing a mountain they knew nothing about as it was getting

late wasn't the *best* idea, so they wanted to concoct a new plan instead.

"Listen up, scouts!" Everyone except Jamie snapped to attention and saluted. "The sun is starting to set, so I think it'd be a good idea to find a place to settle down for the night." Jamie reemerged atop a cliff directly above the group with an irritated look on their face. "So, not only do you wait to say that until *after* I climbed up here, but you also decide you're in charge now?"

Riley chose to ignore their hostility and motioned towards Jade. "Jade, did you two find anything while you were exploring?"

Jamie scaled back down the mountain and butted in before Jade could answer. "Hey, I asked you a ques—" Jade slugged Jamie in the shoulder. "What the fuck was that for, Jade?!" Jamie whined and rubbed their shoulder. Jade shot an angry glare at Jamie, but bit their tongue before they could say anything. They then nodded their head in response to Riley's question.

Jamie opened their mouth to speak again, but Jade suddenly snapped their head towards them. They firmly placed their hands atop Jamie's shoulders despite Jamie's whines at the pain it caused. "I am *so* tired of you *running away* and *whining* when we're in the *middle of nowhere* on an *abandoned island*. If you have *nothing* to say, *please*, JUST. SHUT. UP!"

Jade didn't wait for anyone to say anything. They simply began to walk along the mountainside, signaling for everyone else to follow. Orange hesitantly followed behind Jade, but neither Riley nor Jamie made an effort to move. Instead, Jamie only sat down and brought their knees up to their face. What Riley didn't expect was for Jamie to start crying, *especially* in front of them.

Riley was unsure how to respond. On one hand, everything in their body was screaming at them to comfort Jamie. On the other hand, they knew that Jamie had been acting very cold towards them since they met. They were afraid to say or do anything in fear of invoking a worse response from Jamie.

Despite their worst fears, they decided to take their chances and sit down a few feet in front of Jamie.

After a few minutes, Jamie mumbled something that Riley barely made out. "Why are you still here?"

That was a good question. Why were they still there? They could've just left knowing Jamie didn't like them. They could've left someone else there to deal with them. They could've done a lot of things differently, but they didn't, because they knew they shouldn't.

Riley sighed. "I'm here because I refuse to leave anyone behind." Jamie looked up at them. "*Yes*, that includes you, too. I'm not gonna make you talk, but I'm not gonna leave you here either."

Jamie drew a ragged breath. "Jade… never got that mad at me before… usually they'd get annoyed, but not like that…" They pulled away long enough to rub their eyes before burying their face again.

Riley hummed in contemplation. All things considered, it was more likely that Jade was *stressed* rather than *mad*. They *were* in the middle of nowhere and as much as Riley hated to admit it, Jamie was likely only making things more difficult for them. Riley echoed these thoughts to Jamie. Jamie hesitantly acknowledged them with a nod.

Orange suddenly reappeared in Riley's line of sight, but Riley motioned for them to stay away. However, Jamie also caught sight of Orange. "I guess they're looking for us… maybe we're the slowpokes now…" They softly chuckled at their own remark. Jamie got up without another word, and Riley followed suit shortly after. They both followed Orange as they led them somewhere.

Orange stopped both Riley and Jamie right before a turn. "Uh… f-friendly warning… m-maybe don't talk to Jade r-right now… they s-seem a bit… sad? So, uh, w-when we get there, just… p-pick a spot and… try to relax, o-okay?" The two of them nodded in response.

As the trio turned the corner, they came upon a very shoddy camp within an alcove. All that Riley could see was a campfire and both Jade and Orange's belongings separately piled up near the fire. It was far from luxurious, and it'd probably leave them very sore in the morning, but it'd work for the night.

Jade was in the midst of carrying extra firewood when the trio arrived. They gently placed the firewood near where they stood and gave a small wave to the trio. Jamie and Riley hesitantly returned the wave, and Orange responded with a more enthusiastic wave. Wordlessly, Jade picked the firewood back up and placed it down near the wall of the alcove.

Both Jade and Orange returned to their spots, which left only Riley and Jamie to pick their own. Jamie opted to sit across from Jade, much to Jade's dismay. Riley settled down beside Orange, to which Orange immediately attached to their side.

For a few minutes, all anybody could do was stare at the fire or at each other. The air was extremely tense after the day's events. It was too suffocating to be able to say anything. What was there to say, anyways?

Much to everyone's surprise, Jamie was the one to break the silence. "Riley, right?" Riley hummed in affirmation. "So, uh, is… Orange… you know… yours?" Riley took a glance down at Orange, who was now sleeping, before responding. "You'd think they were because of how attached they are to me, but… no. No, they're not…" *Not yet, at least.* Jamie seemed content by this answer, as their gaze returned to the fire with no further questions.

A few more moments of silence passed. This time, it was a tired yawn from Jade that broke the silence. Right. Fatigue was very much a problem still, even when stranded in the middle of nowhere. Riley gave Jade a worried look. "Get some sleep, you two. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow." Neither Jade nor Jamie dared to contest as both of them appeared to be very tired.

Riley didn't wait for further confirmation, instead leaning back themselves. The ground beneath them was cold and hard, and they had nothing to cover themselves or Orange with. Not the most comfortable place to sleep, but they couldn't be picky either, given the circumstances. They were lucky to even be *alive*.

Despite the newfound tension between Jade and Jamie, Riley felt more at ease knowing that everyone was reunited and alive. Tomorrow was going to be a long day, and they needed all of the rest they could get, so they closed their eyes and drew Orange closer to them. They were tired themselves, and did nothing to protest the fatigue that suddenly emerged and enveloped them in darkness.

# Chapter 4: A Brief Respite

A stray ray of sunlight caught Riley's eyes at a bad angle, startling them from their sleep. They groggily opened and rubbed their eyes. As expected, their back felt stiff and their limbs ached, but they weren't exactly in a position to be picky. They made it through the night *alive*. That's what mattered the most.

The ground was still cold, yet the warmth from the fire still raged on. They'd half-expected the kids to be noisy or complaining, but… there was nothing but silence. The crackling of the fire and the faint sound of crashing waves were all Riley could hear. In any other circumstance, it'd be therapeutic. They had no time to enjoy it now, though.

After a small groan, they forced themselves upward and scanned the camp's current conditions. It seemed that the fire had fresh firewood, which would explain why it hadn't been reduced to ashes yet. Jade and Jamie were sitting near a cliff, talking among themselves. Orange was still asleep, softly snoring besides Riley.

For a moment, Riley considered waking Orange up. However, with everything that Orange did yesterday, maybe it was for the best that they got as much as sleep as possible.

Riley slowly moved Orange so they'd be laying on the ground, then stood up themselves. They froze when Orange let out a small whine and tightly clutched their Bing Bong plushie, but otherwise they showed no signs of waking up. Riley let out a breath that they were unaware they were holding.

Riley's first thought was to approach Jade and Jamie, but they assumed that those two wouldn't appreciate them prying. They instead looked around for anything else that stood out.

They noticed a stray granola bar by their feet. It was mostly untouched aside from the dirt and dust on the wrapper. It still had a few weeks until it expired, so one of them must've dropped it without knowing. They scanned the camp for something to store it in, but found nothing, so they instead stuffed it in their trench coat to save for the future.

Speaking of their trench coat…

They rolled up their right sleeve and took another look at their forearm. The bandage appeared to be mostly intact, albeit a bit dirty. It'd likely need to be replaced with a clean one sooner than later. Their arm still felt fine to move, and it didn't hurt to touch. At least it wouldn't get infected anymore.

Nothing else stood out to Riley to clean up, so they decided to sit down near the edge of the cliff. They wanted to take this time to scope out the area. It wasn't entirely for leisure, but to also try to map out a route from the camp to the top.

They set their sights on the shore. Aside from the palm trees and bushes they had spotted before, there were some other things they hadn't spotted until now. Gray pillars of stone in

various proportions protruded from the ground in a seemingly random fashion. Luggage was haphazardly scattered around, presumably from the crash. Though… they couldn't recall anyone carrying on any luggage themselves. The plane had also stopped smoking at some point during the night, leaving behind charred remnants of what was once carrying all of them in the air.

Focusing their sights upwards, they spotted a few bridges connecting to… floating islands? Never mind that; not the most pressing matter at the moment. They saw multiple patches of sand that jutted out from and led up to the top the mountain. They'd also spotted the same hazards they spotted before: jellyfish and urchins.

There was a small problem, though. A route was not readily apparent. With all of the mountains they'd hiked on in the past, there was a clear path. With this mountain, though, there was no such path to be seen.

Maybe they could consult with Jamie on where to go, assuming they were in the mood to talk. They didn't forget that Jamie had some kind of vendetta against them. They may have had a moment of vulnerability last night, but they didn't expect them to continue to be docile today.

They'd find out very soon though, since Jamie flopped down beside them unannounced… or maybe they did announce it and Riley was too zoned out to notice.

"Huh. The slowpoke is also one of the last to wake up. What a surprise." Jamie rolled their eyes, then shifted their gaze up toward the mountaintop. "Guess I'm not the only one trying to figure this mountain out. Honestly, it's a complete pain in the ass trying to figure out how to climb up it."

So they *were* in a talkative mood today. Good. They did seem a bit less rough around the edges after their chats with Riley and Jade. Riley just hoped that they'd continue to be this way.

Riley rubbed their chin and hummed in acknowledgment. "Mhm. I'm struggling to figure it out myself. I was actually gonna try to talk to you to help me figure this out. And, uh, before you can say anything, cut Orange some slack. They really worked themselves down to the bone yesterday." Jamie let a giggle slip before they covered their mouth. They then looked down at the Band-Aids Orange had applied, before letting out a sigh. "Guess so."

Jamie stood up and paced back and forth, humming what sounded like a song to themselves. Riley couldn't make out the tune, but it seemed that they got lost in thought. Maybe they didn't know a way up, either? This mountain was really shaping up to be a challenge, especially when the kid that seemingly loved climbing struggled to figure it out themselves.

Jamie suddenly stopped. "You wanted my help, right?" Riley nodded. "Well, being lazy isn't gonna help us figure it out. Guess we'll just have to wing it. Y'know, climb up to one of the patches, if it doesn't work, climb up to another one, blah blah blah. I think even a moron understands the idea." Jamie shot a mischievous grin at Riley. "Do you understand?"

Riley chose to ignore the very blatant insult and looked back at the patches they had spotted earlier. Maybe those *were* the route after all? They were just not familiar with climbing. Hiking was more their forte than anything. They did see some kind of path if they could all muster the stamina to do that much climbing. It'd have to work for now.

"Yeah, I guess that'll have to work. No other way around it. Thanks, Jamie." Riley smiled at them. Jamie scoffed. "Yeah, whatever." They started walking back towards the fire, but stopped and turned towards Riley once more. "Oh, and… thanks… for not leaving me behind last night, I guess." They hurried along before Riley could respond. Riley's smile grew wider for just a moment.

A blur of orange suddenly barely missed a collision with Jamie and darted directly towards Riley. Orange skidded to a stop right before Riley, with the first aid kit in their hands. "G-Good morning, Riley! I'm s-sorry for sleeping too long…" They sat down beside Riley and unzipped the first aid kit to grab more bandage and gauze. "W-Well… let's g-get you a new b-bandage, okay?" Riley nodded.

Despite Orange's caution, it still stung to remove the bandage, but Riley knew better at this point than to complain. They got a good look at the wound. It had started to scab over and they thought it looked kind of cool. Maybe it'd leave behind a cool scar. How would Jamie feel if they saw it?

Orange repeated the same process as the first time. Dab it with wet gauze, then have Riley hold some dry gauze down while they wrapped it with a new bandage. It felt like the process went quicker this time, since Orange was a lot less shaky than before. Like clockwork, they scooted over after they were finished and smiled at their work.

Riley nodded approvingly at the new bandage. "Appreciate it, Orange. Good morning to you too, but please don't apologize for sleeping. You did a lot yesterday, and we weren't really ready to leave regardless."

"Oh, o-okay… uh, what w-were you and Jamie t-talking about?"

"Just figuring out how to get up to the top of this mountain. From what we can see, there's a whole lot of climbing ahead of us." Riley frowned. "I was really hoping there was a safer path we could just walk on, but…"

Orange softly patted Riley's right hand. "It's okay! W-We'll be j-just fine! We s-survived the crash, we c-can do this!" They gave Riley an unapologetically toothy grin. It seemed like their confidence had increased overnight.

Their hunger must've increased too, since their stomach suddenly growled. "O-Oh… uh…" Riley grabbed the granola bar that they found earlier from their pocket. "Here. Might be a good idea to eat something before we get going." Orange shamefully accepted the granola bar. "S-Sorry. Thank you…"

Riley wasn't sure how to respond. How *do* they respond to a kid feeling bad about accepting food? Especially when they're clearly hungry? They opted to just let Orange enjoy the granola bar in peace. No point in pressing that matter at the moment.

Orange finished the granola bar and held the trash in front of them. A very confused look swept across their face; maybe they were trying to find somewhere to get rid of it?

Riley put out their hand. “I’ll take the trash from you and throw it away if we find a trash can, okay?” Orange placed the wrapper in Riley’s hand without any hesitation, and watched as they stuffed it back in the same pocket they had grabbed it from.

Orange slowly rose up from where they sat. “O-Okay, uh, I’m g-gonna talk to the o-others before we go…”

Riley noticed them fidgeting with their hands. “Something on your mind, Orange?” Orange said nothing for a moment. “Uh… O-Orange… isn’t a-actually… my name, but… I d-don’t know what it is…”

Riley had a suspicion that this was the case, but at the time, they didn’t want to pry into that part of Orange’s life. Especially since they had just met at the time. Maybe now was a better time since they’ve grown a bit closer?

“Well… here, I have an idea.” Orange sat back down and looked at Riley expectantly. “Why don’t we come up with some names once we make it to the top?” Orange cocked their head in confusion, as if they weren’t expecting that response. “W-Wait, really?” Riley nodded. “Yeah, maybe we can find a name that you like.”

Orange tapped their chin. “I think… I t-think I’d like that… I’ll t-try my best to come up with some!”

“Great, I look forward to hearing what you have.”

“O-Okay! Well, uh, I’m g-gonna talk to t-the others now! T-Thanks, Riley!” Orange skipped away, gleefully.

Looked like it was Jade’s turn to talk to Riley. Riley was really popular today, it seemed. “Thank you for giving them both a chance to talk.”

“And what about you?”

Jade hummed. “Not much to say that hasn’t already been said. Jamie and I are on better terms now, though. Maybe not perfect…” Jade finally sat down. “…but at least I’m not drowning in my own guilt anymore.”

“Your… guilt? This is about last night, right?”

“Indeed. And before you ask, I… I didn’t stay behind last night because I didn’t think I’d be the right person for them to talk to. I appreciate you talking to them, even if they weren’t very fond of you.”

“Weren’t?” That had to be a deliberate choice to use “weren’t” over “aren’t.”

“Yeah. I won’t lie, maybe they’re still a bit of a jerk in general, but that’s just how they are. They… talked about you in a more positive light this morning. And they seemed content with

how your conversation went with them, too. So… thanks."

That was the first time Riley saw Jade smile.

"Anyways, I think those two are starting to pack up. At least, they were before I came over here. We should probably help so we can leave."

Riley let out a sad sigh. "I… forgot we were stranded for a minute. Just taking in the view and having chats. Felt like were just on another camping trip…" They stood up and stretched. "You're right, though. No point in lingering here when we should be climbing."

Jamie was helping Orange gather their belongings as Jade and Riley returned to the campsite. Jamie held Orange's Bing Bong plushie while Orange was tidying up their first aid kit. Riley couldn't help but smile. As much as Jamie wanted to be seen as a tough and stubborn kid, it seemed like they still had a heart deep down.

Jade was busy sorting out their own belongings, which left Riley to tend to cleaning up the campsite. They took a look around to see if anything stood out. Based on previous camping trips, they'd come to expect a mess. However, none of them left any trash or stray belongings scattered around. Furthermore, the campfire had been dealt with, and *properly,* at that. These kids weren't messing around, were they?

Riley looked over at the pile of firewood that Jade set up the night before. For a moment, they had considered moving it. They ultimately decided against it, though. If someone were to be unfortunate enough to end up a similar predicament, maybe they'd end up here and have a pile of firewood already ready to go.

So much for leaving no trace, but the circumstances here were just a *little* different from a normal trip. Riley internally accepted that they'd take all of the blame if it ended up being a problem.

Everyone shuffled over to the now-extinguished campfire, indicating that they'd finished their share of work. "Good work on cleaning up after yourselves, everyone. So, based on what me and Jamie found, it seems like we've got a lot of climbing ahead of us. We're going to climb for the rest of the day and find another spot come nightfall. Questions? Concerns?"

Nothing but silence.

"Well, then I suppose we should go ahead and leave, then. Please stay close, and if you *really* need to split up, take a buddy with you. Got it?" Everyone nodded in agreement. Riley stepped out from within the alcove, with their troop in tow.

Riley wasn't sure how they ended up being in a leader role, or why everyone silently decided to follow them, but they weren't going to back down from it now. Not when they had their own little troop depending on them for survival.

# Chapter 5: Doubts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The prospect of Riley being a leader left them with an uneasy feeling. Sure, they accepted the role, but that didn't mean they were comfortable with it. They were never meant to be a leader. They knew that, as did their fellow scouts. Hell, even their own *scoutmaster* had no faith in them. And yet, here they were, leading three kids to what would be either their salvation or their demise.

They didn't have a great read on Jade, but they seemed like just as capable of a candidate. They didn't have Jamie seemingly hating them and their every move. Orange appeared to have no problems with them either. Why couldn't it have been them, instead?

A sinking feeling suddenly emerged in Riley's stomach. They felt like they didn't deserve to take charge. They were an experienced scout, yes, but leadership was not their forte. What if they made a poor choice? Came across something they didn't know how to solve? What if they just got mocked for not knowing it all? What if—

Ugh. Get it together, Riley. Why do you always overthink everything? They obviously had a reason to choose you.

That reason was fairly obvious when it came to children. They gravitated more towards adults, especially ones that were friendly towards them. Conveniently, Riley fit quite comfortably into that category.

Jamie had been staring intently at Riley since they stopped. They might've noticed that something was off, but they chose not to say anything. Instead, their eyes told Riley everything they needed to know. There was… a hint of concern, definitely some irritation and impatience too. Beneath all of that, as much as they tried to hide it, was trust. Trust in someone that hardly trusted themselves not to fuck everything up.

Riley decided to tuck away their doubts for the moment. There was no point in dwelling on what-ifs, not when the deed was already done. It was just a waste of time and sunlight. All that mattered now was the survival of them and their troop as well as making it to the peak of the mountain.

They traced the side of the mountain with their eyes to see if they could find anything. Their eyes landed on what appeared to be a plateau, roughly twenty feet above them. Maybe their best bet would be to climb up there and get a better angle on the mountain. It was a pretty lengthy climb, but there were no other options readily apparent.

Well… it was a pretty lengthy climb for an unexperienced climber, anyways. Like… everyone in the group, except for Jamie.

Riley pitched their idea to the rest of the group and was met with a mixed response. Jamie accepted the idea, and even seemed eager to, in their own words, “give it a shot.” Jade… not so much. Orange only shrugged their shoulders and hummed an “I dunno.” Not exactly the response that Riley was hoping for, but it’d work.

“Okay, so, uh, who wants to climb up first?”

Riley was immediately met with a death glare from Jamie. “You came up with the idea, you go up first. End of discussion.”

Guess it was decided, then.

With their left hand, Riley latched onto the side of the mountain to the point where their knuckles were brushed with a lighter shade of turquoise. They repeated this motion with their right hand, but a little bit higher. Their feet mirrored these motions, pushing their weight upward.

The climb felt like forever. Every motion they made felt like dragging through mud. Their lungs struggled to suck in all of the air. Their muscles ached and their fingers burned. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise, since more strenuous physical activity generally left behind these effects. And yet, above all else, it felt *embarrassin*g.

Finally, they made it to the top of the plateau. Sure enough, it was flat, so they allowed themselves to detach from the mountain. Immediately after landing, they collapsed to the ground and scrambled to lay down on their back. The aches and pains from the climb eased up just a bit, and their lungs finally got the air they sought out. That took *a lot* of energy out of them.

Jamie had a much more graceful landing. They slid closer to the ground and let go from the mountain, landing gently on their two feet. The look on their face when they turned around and saw Riley was indescribable. “Really? That itty bitty climb knocked you down?” Riley was too winded to give a response, but they likely would’ve just apologized if they could. They instead looked away shamefully.

Jade was not too far behind Jamie. Their landing was nearly as rough as Riley’s, though they were able to recover. They decided to lean up against the mountain to regain some stamina. It was hard to tell from the outside, but from the looks of it, they seemed to be a bit tired as well. It seemed like Jamie wanted to make a snide remark, but they withheld it.

Then came Orange. Unsurprisingly, they were a natural. Their climbing was nowhere near as polished as Jamie, as evident by the fact that they nearly lost their grip, but… they were a natural. They stopped to catch a breath for just a moment, but they just as quickly perked back up and looked ready to go. “T-That, uh, w-wow! I… climbed some s-stuff in the city, but, a m-mountain? T-That was…” They trailed off when they saw Riley and Jade.

Jamie scoffed. “Well, at least *someone* can climb!”

Orange giggled and blushed at the backhanded compliment. “W-Wow, how n-nice of you, Jamie!” Riley could sense… sarcasm? From Orange?

Jamie really did *not* appear to be a fan of that response. They crossed their arms and cleared their throat. “Uh, whatever. Anyways… you two gonna just sit around, or what? We’ve got a whole mountain to climb still!”

That sinking feeling that Riley pushed away had returned in full force after their climbing performance. Jamie belittling them for it definitely didn’t help. If they couldn’t make a simple climb, what hope did they have in leading everyone out alive?

Riley slapped themselves this time. *You’re such an idiot, Riley. Stop. Over. Thinking. It.*

It was Jamie’s turn to speak. “Okay, seriously Riley. That’s the second time you’ve spaced out today. What’s your problem? Just gonna pretend you’re fine again?”

Riley didn’t respond. Jamie wouldn’t understand, anyways. They opted to just stand up despite their body screaming at them not to.

Jamie shook their head disapprovingly. “Of course you will. Whatever. Suit yourself.”

Orange butted in with their own thoughts. “H-Hey, uh, are you…” They shook their head. “N-Nevermind… I s-see another way up. Uh,” They pointed behind them. There was, in fact, another way up. “S-Should we split up?”

Jade spoke up for Riley. “I think so. I’ll stay behind with Riley. I’d like to… talk to them, alone.”

Orange nodded in response. “O-Okay! We’ll, uh… w-wait, is everything—”

“Yeah, sure, that works for me, I guess.” Jamie walked away and motioned for Orange to follow. “Let’s go check this out, Orange.” Orange hesitated for a moment but eventually complied and headed over towards the other path with Jamie to check it out.

Jade joined Riley by their side. They didn’t look quite as worn out as Riley, but the climb clearly took its toll on them too. “Well, if it makes you feel any better… I also suck at climbing. Jamie always lectures me about it when we go rock climbing together.”

Riley didn’t say anything. They barely even processed what Jade had said. They couldn’t get over the fact that they couldn’t even make a short climb. How was anyone supposed to take them seriously when someone nearly half their age did it better and belittled them, at that?

Their gaze drifted down towards the shore. They noticed some kind of mysterious fog slowly creeping in. It had nearly engulfed the plane, perhaps to be lost to time forever. What if that was…

A pat on their back from Jade startled them from their thoughts. Jade opened their mouth as if they were going to say something, but it seemed like the words got stuck in their throat. They instead offered a small smile.

Riley groaned. “Look, I just… I don’t really think I should…”

Jade cocked their head to the side. “Burden a kid with your problems?” It almost sounded like they were trying to imitate Riley. “You were going to say that, right?”

“I… Uh… Yeah. Something like that.”

“Look around you, Riley. Do you see anyone else that you can talk to? Bottling up your emotions is a bad idea, especially when you’re stranded on a remote island.”

Riley opened their mouth to contest, but Jade put up their left hand before they could continue.

“I’m wiser than I seem, Riley. I…” Jade fidgeted with their hat for a moment. “I’ve taken care of both me and Jamie for a while. Maybe I can help you help us.”

“You two don’t have someone to take care of you?”

Jade stiffened up ever so slightly. “What makes you think that?”

“You said, word for word, “I’ve taken care of both me and Jamie”… wouldn’t that suggest you don’t have someone to take care of you?”

“Well, you’re certainly wiser than you seem, too.” *Was that a backhanded compliment?* “Anyways, you’d be correct, yes.”

Riley’s heart sank. “Oh. Sorry. Uh, do you…”

Jade sighed. “Long story short, our parents…” Their tone suddenly shifted to be more solemn. “They aren’t in the picture anymore. And our grandparents… they don’t really do anything for us. If I was old enough to have my own place, we’d be there instead.”

Jade kicked a rock and watched as it plummeted towards the base of the mountain.

“Now, your turn.”

Riley hesitated for a moment. “I’m… having doubts.”

Jade raised an eyebrow. “Doubts?”

“Yeah. I was never really, uh, “leader” material, and struggling with that climb didn’t help my self-esteem. I just… doubt that I’m supposed to be the one to be in this position.”

Jade hummed, then turned to face Riley. “Let me ask you a question, Riley. What do *you* think it takes to be a leader? Not whatever your Leadership badge material said, I want *your* interpretation.”

“That they should be able to do everything they expect others to do, have all the answers to everyone’s questions, those kind of things…?”

Jade shook their head in disapproval. “Well, there’s your problem. You’re approaching this completely wrong.”

Riley tilted their head. “Wrong?”

“Mhm. In fact, leaders are usually the complete opposite of your interpretation. They don’t know all of the answers, and should not pretend to, either. Instead, they ask their team for help if they need it. While having a leader *is* important, they aren’t the only person making decisions or figuring things out. That’s where the team comes in.”

“But… if they just ask their team for help… what’s the point in, you know, leading?”

“Leaders provide direction, structure, purpose. That doesn’t mean they do everything themselves. Let’s put this into a real example. Say you don’t know whether or not something is poisonous. Would you eat it and find out, or ask around and see if anyone else knows?”

Riley decided to put their newfound knowledge to the test. “Uh… ask… around…?”

“Correct. You and the others learn something new and that person feels like they’ve contributed and that they’ve been listened to. They’re more likely to cooperate and be cordial now that you’ve acknowledged them and utilized their knowledge.”

“How did you learn about this?”

“Mostly trial and error while taking care of Jamie.”

“So… I should continue to take charge, but also ask for help if I don’t know something?”

“Essentially, yes.” Jade paused briefly and tapped their chin. “For the most part, you’ve already been doing a good job. You just have the wrong mentality about it, which is why we’re talking now.”

Riley didn’t respond for a few minutes. Instead, they decided to trace out a route on their side of the mountain. That’s what they were supposed to be doing, after all. However, it all only seemed like a massive wall. “No way up from here…”

“I’m getting that impression, too.”

“Uh, thanks… Jade. I’m… I’m sorry, for putting that on yo—”

“Enough of that. You’re welcome. Just don’t forget what I said.”

Before Riley could respond, they heard footsteps running towards them from behind. Orange ran up to Riley and Jade, with Jamie walking briskly behind them. “H-Hi again! We, uh, f-found a really q-quick way up!! W-What about you t-two?”

Riley and Jade both spoke in unison. “Nothing.”

Jamie stepped up near the edge and looked for themselves. “Huh. Whaddya know? There really is nothing here. Welp, I guess we know which way we’re going, then.”

Orange waved from where they had come from. “T-This way!”

Jade gave one final look at Riley and gave Jamie a nod before they headed in Orange's direction. Jamie looked at Riley curiously, wondering why they weren't making an effort to move.

It almost appeared as if Jamie was going to say something, but Riley spoke up first. "Uh, hey… Jamie… could you… maybe help us with climbing?"

Jamie scoffed. "About time you asked."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the fact that you had a hard time making that climb, figuring out where to go, and nearly having a friggin' breakdown over it told me everything. You suck at climbing and need someone to help you out with that. Luckily, that someone…" They pressed their thumb into their own chest. "...happens to be me."

"Jamie…"

"But don't think that this means we're buddies now, got it? We just have a common goal." The look in Jamie's eyes betrayed the intent behind their words. Riley chose not to press it, though, in case Jamie would have a sudden change of heart.

Riley sighed. "Alright. Go ahead. I'm right behind you."

Jamie led Riley back to Jade and Orange, who were patiently waiting. "Listen, you two. Riley asked me to lend a hand with climbing. So, uh, just follow me. Understood?" Jade and Orange nodded. "Good. Let's stop wasting time here, then."

Now that Riley wasn't at the helm for now, they had more time to think about what Jade had said.

Help, both receiving and giving, were foreign concepts to them. They didn't necessarily view it as a sign of weakness, but working alone meant that they were… alone. They had to figure things out on their own. It felt weird to acknowledge that they could be helped.

Maybe Jamie was right. There was no "I" in "team," after all.

It just… still felt weird.

Regardless, it was a bit clearer now, too. It was okay to ask for help. Nobody wanted or expected them to be perfect. *As usual, it was just you, Riley.* Their team just… needed someone to give them purpose. To listen to them. To work together with.

And that is exactly what Riley will do to ensure everyone makes it out alive.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact #2: Up until this chapter, the chapters in my master doc for this fic weren't formatted correctly. Meaning, I've had to go back and remove all of the double spaces that came up as a result of me fixing the doc. Not so fun for me, but maybe a fun fact for you!

# Chapter 6: Free at Last...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After what felt like forever, the group finally reached a flatter and larger area of the mountain to spread out and rest on. It was quite rocky, so it wouldn't work long-term, but it was at least safe. As much as Riley didn't mind being around the kids, they could tell they were getting antsy with climbing and being so close to one another.

Jamie beckoned for everyone to meet with to them. "If you wanna get some rest, now's your chance. Dunno when we'll get another spot like… this…" Their gaze suddenly drifted away from the group. "Wait… is that… *smoke*?!" They pointed over towards the peak. Riley followed where Jamie pointed and… there really was smoke. And where there was smoke, there was fire. "Alright, scratch getting rest, we're getting the hell outta here!"

They all raced to reach the peak of the mountain. What they found at the top was nothing short of a miracle. There was some food already skewered and placed near an already ignited campfire; one marshmallow and three hot dogs. *Wait… isn't that unsafe?* There was also a backpack and a statue. The statue in particular confused Riley. Maybe they'd investigate that later. To top it all off, there was a lone palm tree, though unfortunately it bore no coconuts.

They didn't feel so bad about leaving a trace now.

Both Jamie and Orange spotted the marshmallow and raced to grab it. Orange reached out for it, but Jamie swiped it just out of their reach. Orange appeared to be upset by this action, but quickly forced their expression back to a more neutral one. Jamie noticed this and attempted to offer the marshmallow, but Orange refused.

"You were just making a pouty face when I grabbed it, and now you suddenly don't want it?"

"I-It's okay, really!" Orange hastily grabbed a hot dog. "S-See? I can eat t-this, too!"

Jamie's eyes darted between the marshmallow they held and Orange. They repeated this several times before sighing and offering the marshmallow to Orange. "Just… give me the hot dog and take the friggin' marshmallow already. I'm hungry."

Orange eyed the offered marshmallow warily. "B-But… you g-got it fair and—"

"Oh, *shut up* with the 'fair and square' crap." Orange winced at Jamie's sudden hostility. "Uh, I mean, clearly you want this more than me. So, just take it. *Please*."

Orange slowly raised their right hand to grab the skewer from Jamie's hand. They stopped just before grabbing the skewer, their hand trembling in place. Jamie carefully placed the marshmallow in Orange's hand, then grabbed the hot dog from their left hand.

Jamie and Orange decided to sit across from each other, then proceeded to toast their own snack. Riley picked up their own hot dog and sat down beside Orange to do the same. Jade was busy digging through the backpack and sorting out everyone's supplies, so Riley decided to leave them alone for the moment.

Rather than join the rest of the group, Jade instead shifted their attention towards the broken statue. Truth be told, Riley was curious about it themselves. They grabbed the hot dog that would've belonged to Jade and toasted it. They weren't sure if Jade actually *wanted* it that way, but… it was too late to dwell on that now. They slipped away while both Jamie and Orange were distracted by their food.

Jade was sitting on their knees and staring intently at the writing on the statue when Riley walked up. They'd been muttering to themselves about their observations. "Is this… some kind of ancient language? Huh." They let out a sigh of defeat and stood back up. They nearly jumped out of their skin once they looked to their left and noticed that Riley was standing beside them.

Riley held out the hot dog as a peace offering. "Uh… hot dog?" Jade hesitated, but when their stomach growled, they snatched it out of Riley's hand and took a huge bite out of it. *Poor kid must've been hungry.*

After Jade finished eating, they stood up and brushed themselves off then staked the skewer in the ground nearby. "Thank you for the food. I'm sure you heard me talking to myself, but the text on this statue is indecipherable. I'm… not really sure what purpose it serves." They then stepped aside to give Riley a chance to analyze it themselves. "Take a crack at it if you're interested."

Just as Jade stated, the text on the statue was indecipherable. Not only was it a language they were not familiar with, but time and the elements had clearly taken their toll on it. Various chunks of the statue had eroded away and most of the color was muted. It appeared to be sculpted as if it was supposed to be holding something… but nothing was there. It was an interesting find, but it left Riley with more questions than answers.

Riley walked around to the back and to no one's surprise, they found nearly the exact same details as they did on the front. However, they noticed a bundle of papers stuffed in a divot. They grabbed the papers and discovered that there were three of them for them to read.

The first page was a diary entry.

*Dear Diary, bad news!!!*

*The ship captain made an oopsy, and we've wound up crashed on this mysterious island!* Mysterious… island…? *Thankfully, mysterious islands are my speciality.*

*With our whole troop working together, we'll reach the top of the PEAK and signal for help in no time!* The power of friendship prevails…

*In the meantime, I'll take this opportunity to add some additional pages to my famous guidebook.*

Riley's eyes drifted down to the signature… *Scoutmaster Myres*.

Scoutmaster Myres. The same scoutmaster that met his untimely demise yet lived on as a legend. Something akin to… Bigfoot. A scary story you'd tell around the campfire. And Riley just… had one of his diary entries? Why here? Was this… the same mysterious island that he…?

Riley shook their head. Never mind that. They decided to take a look at the second page. Just like Scoutmaster Myres' journal entry stated, it was an additional page educating scouts on proper precautions with any mushrooms they find.

*BONUS RULE 1*

*SCAN YOUR SHROOMS!*

*Mushrooms can be a valuable source of nutrition in the wilderness.* Riley knew that from experience. *But watch out!! Some of them can kill you, or even make you poop your pants.* They… unfortunately also knew that from experience.

*There's always a way to tell the poisonous ones apart. Here's just one example!*

Just below the text, there was an illustration of two mushrooms. One of them looked almost like the head of a screw with a thumbs up beneath it; the other one was dotted and had a skull beneath it. *Would've been nice to know back then. Oh well. Nice to know now, at least.*

Riley suddenly heard a giggle to their right. They turned their head to the source and it turned out to be Jamie. They must've read the "poop your pants" line and got a kick out of it.

"Haha! 'Poop your pants.' That's funny! Whoever wrote this definitely had that happen to them!" Jamie swiped their hand across the statue, leaving behind a thick layer of sand and dust on their fingers. "Why are you two lookin' at this dusty old thing anyways? There's nothing cool here!"

Jade joined the duo at the back of the statue. "As funny as it may sound with the mushrooms, it *is* true. Some of them have adverse effects. I can tell you which ones are good and bad if you're uncertain. Just come find me and ask." Riley nodded while Jamie rolled their eyes. "As for your question…" Jade shrugged. "No idea. It just caught our attention, I suppose."

Riley looked at the final page which contained an informational spiel about gathering around the campfire.

*BONUS RULE 2*

*GATHER 'ROUND THE FIRE*

*If you find a nice place to light a campfire, make sure to bring your friends close by first! The fire brings something even better than heat and cooked food… and that's motivation.*

Riley scoffed at the last part. *Would "motivation" bring you back from the cusp of death? Heat you up so you don't suffer from hypothermia?* Jamie scoffed in a similar manner at the

same thing. “That’s a fat lie. ‘Motivation’ isn’t better than some good food, nuh uh.” *You and me both, Jamie.*

“Welp. That was incredibly boring and useless. I’m going back to the fire.” Jamie stopped in their tracks. “Oh, and, Riley? I think Orange wants something from you. They’ve been looking at you kinda funny for a bit. It’d be a real shame if you kept them waiting.” They walked back towards the campfire without waiting for a response.

Riley re-organized the papers and went to put them back, but was stopped by Jade. They held out an open hand, as if they were requesting the papers. Riley complied and watched as Jade tucked them away in their backpack. “You never know. Maybe these will come in handy sometime soon.”

A wave of confusion, then concern, swept across Riley when they didn’t see Orange at the fire. Their eyes darted around the campsite before landing on the palm tree that Orange sat beside. Just like Jamie had said, Orange was staring at Riley. However, once Riley spotted them, Orange tore their gaze away and towards the ground.

Riley sat down beside Orange, leaned up against the tree and gazed out towards the horizon. They always took the sunset for granted, but it wasn’t until they were in a life threatening scenario that they truly appreciated it. It marked the end of another day, their continued fight for survival.

It was nice, but that wasn’t the reason why they were there. Jamie had tipped them off to Orange’s antics. Orange needed something, they just weren’t saying it out loud. They had briefly acknowledged Riley’s presence, but they seemed to be afraid to speak their mind. As much as they hated the idea, it was likely that Riley would have to probe a bit for answers.

They looked over at Orange, who continued to be avoidant. This would likely be the best time to get through to them. “So, uh, Orange… is everything okay?”

Orange stopped fidgeting with the stick. “I… I haven’t f-figured it out yet…” They appeared to be on the verge of crying.

It? A confused look swept across Riley’s face. “What do you mean?”

“M-My…” Orange drew a jagged breath. “My… new name.”

“Ah. Well… I did say we could work it out together, didn’t I?”

Orange rubbed their eyes. “I… I guess so… I just…” They sighed. “Had t-too much fun climbing to, uh, t-think about it…”

“If it makes you feel any better, I was too busy struggling to think about it, so…” Riley shook their head. “Well, regardless, we’ve got plenty of time now.” They turned towards Orange. “Maybe some questions will get some ideas going?”

Orange nodded then mirrored Riley’s motions; the two of them now seated and facing each other.

“Okay, let’s start with this: what are some things that interest you? Maybe things you like to do, favorite objects, things of that sort.”

“W-Well, uh…” Orange looked around for something, but couldn’t find it. “I l-liked that Bing Bong plushie, but uh…” They giggled. “M-Maybe I shouldn’t n-name myself that…”

Riley laughed. “But imagine this, every time you get squeezed, you squeak and then say something random.”

“W-Wait… like t-this?” Orange squeezed themselves and let out a small squeak. They put on the most deadpan face they possibly could. “I’m Bing Bo—” They didn’t even finish their sentence before erupting in laughter.

A grin crept onto Riley’s face, but they managed to keep their composure. “Exactly! But, uh, maybe you’re right. Not the best thing you could name yourself after…”

After the final laugh escaped from Orange, they laid on their back. Their eyes moved over to the moon, which was now shining brightly in the sky. “Uh… I… I do l-like looking at the moon sometimes.” Riley turned to face the moon as well. “The city was r-really quiet at night… s-so I liked to just w-watch from a r-random roof…” That sad look returned to their face. “I’d g-get in so much trouble i-if I got caught… t-then I’d run away…”

*Okay, mountain be damned, I’m adopting this kid and nobody will stop me.*

Riley almost echoed that thought out loud but felt it’d be too sudden. Instead, they offered a name idea based on that spiel. “Hmm. How about… Luna?” They had heard that name before. It was Latin for, well, “moon.”

“L-Luna…?”

“Yeah. A while ago I heard it, it’s Latin for ‘moon.’ Very pretty name for an equally pretty ball floating in the sky.”

Orange repeated it to themselves under their breath several times. “I… I’ll k-keep that one in m-mind…”

“Oh! Uh, I… it’s k-kinda silly because— well, uh, I was t-thinking of ‘Scout’ but…”

“But?”

“N-Now that I’ve t-thought about it… I r-really like Luna… a lot. It, uh, f-feels like… ‘me,’ if… if that makes sense…?”

Riley nodded. “It does. ‘Scout’ is a good one too, but it’s your choice at the end of the day.” They hummed. “And… if nothing else, you could always pick out another one later if you don’t like what you’ve got. Just… maybe have it decided before we go? I know that’s a lot to ask.”

Orange sat up. “N-No. I t-think I’ve decided.”

“You have? Already?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m gonna… I w-wanna be called ‘Luna.’” Luna smiled as their new name left their mouth.

Riley ruffled Luna’s hair, much to their dismay. “Well, that’s settled then, Luna.” They stood up. “Why don’t we go tell the others?”

Luna froze up. “Uh… o-okay…”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll do it for you.”

Luna simply nodded and grabbed Riley’s hand. The two of them headed back to camp, where Jade and Jamie were mid-conversation.

Jamie was the first to spot the two. They appeared to be slightly irritated. “Took you two long enough!” Jade laughed and had a smug look on their face. “Jamie was *reallllllly* worried about Orange.” A mix of embarrassment and anger spread across Jamie’s face. “I was *NOT*!” Jamie let out a defeated sigh and crossed their arms. “Okay… Maybe a little. But that’s all!”

Luna couldn’t help but giggle at the siblings’ antics. They tugged on Riley’s sleeve and motioned for Riley to come close, to which they complied. “M-Maybe I should… t-tell them. Uh, m-maybe when you s-say we picked t-the name out.” Riley nodded.

“Anyways… we’ve got something that we need to tell you two. Back at the previous camp, Orange asked if the two of us could come up with a new name for them when we got here. That’s why we were gone for a while.” Both Jade and Jamie nodded in understanding. Riley gave Luna a reassuring pat on the back. “Why not tell them what that new name is?”

Luna hesitantly stepped up towards the campfire. They opened their mouth, but clammed up the moment they saw Jamie and Jade. *Maybe they just had a little bit of stage fright?* Luna looked back at Riley for reassurance, who then gave them a nod in response.

“Uh… it’s… uh, L-Luna.” Luna immediately darted behind Riley afterwards.

Both Jamie and Jade echoed their name in unison. “Luna.” They then both gave Luna a thumbs up. For the first time since Riley met Jamie, they couldn’t sense any malice in what came next. “I like it.” Luna must’ve got the same vibe, since they peeked out and smiled in response.

Luna stepped out from behind Riley after the positive response to their revelation. Though, Riley wasn’t sure why they hid in the first place. Were they expecting a worse response? Neither Riley nor Jade were ever mean to them, and while Jamie was rough around the edges… their display just now revealed a nicer side of them.

Luna sat down and yawned almost immediately after. The climbing plus the stress from their name likely wore them down. Riley decided to sit down beside Luna, but they wouldn’t be going to sleep themselves for a moment. That didn’t matter for Luna, though. They rested their head on Riley’s lap and fell asleep almost immediately.

Jade laid back, and much like Luna, fell asleep immediately which left Riley and Jamie as the last two awake. Jamie gave a small smile at the sight of Luna, then looked up at Riley. “You know… you’re not so bad after all. Always thought adults sucked, but…” Jamie’s gaze returned to Luna. “You’re okay. Never got to say that with everything going on.”

“Likewise. Can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“I guess you’re right. And uh, thanks… for everything so far. But you didn’t hear any of that from me.” Jamie immediately flopped down on the ground, bringing the conversation to an abrupt end before it could continue.

Just like that, a wave of fatigue crashed over Riley. They had exerted a lot that day themselves, it was only fair that they got to get some rest. They gently moved Luna’s head before laying down on their back to do some stargazing.

The group felt as unified as it would ever be. Which was… quite unfortunate, since they were about to part ways. They’d made it to the top. In the morning, there would be a helicopter waiting to take them all home and that’d be it.

That’s what they wanted to believe, anyways.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact #3: I didn't realize posting a chapter would just post the entire work, so now I'll be slowly adding chapters onto this while it's public. Oops lol.

# Chapter 7: ...Until They Weren't

As Riley opened their eyes, they saw the ever-so familiar blue sky that they'd acquainted themselves with over the past two days. It was cloudy today. The sun struggled to creep through the fluffy white clouds in the sky. It felt a bit colder than usual, but perhaps the fire had gone out during the night. They'd grown used to it at this point.

The ground felt a bit softer than usual. When they went to sleep, they recalled it feeling grainy and warm. What they felt now was soft and fluffy. Maybe someone found a blanket or something and gave it to them? That begged the following question though—who would've been selfless enough to give up that comfort for them?

They rose from where they laid and were greeted by a hill dotted with flowers. They had laid at the base, surrounded by a bed of flowers of varying colors and proportions. *How did I get here?* There was not a single soul in sight. *Where is everyone?* All that stood at the peak was a flag and a box of… flares? *What…?*

They heard a grotesque *crunch* behind them. For a moment, they dared not to look. Maybe if they ignored it, it'd go away. Unfortunately for them, it only got louder until it got so loud and so close that they simply couldn't ignore it anymore.

When they turned around, they were face-to-face with a tall, lanky monster towering above them. Upon closer inspection, it looked like… *Scoutmaster Myres?* He still wore his scoutmaster attire, but it had clearly been mangled by his transformation and by time. *Why does he look like that?*

They had no time to process their own questions, because he immediately grabbed them by the neck with his right hand and lifted them up effortlessly. In his left hand, he pulled up a singular piece of paper.

*RULE 0*

*RULE 0 RULE 0*

*RULE 0 RULE 0*

*Never Abandon a Friend in Need!*

*Never Abandon a Friend in Need!*

*Never Abandon a Friend in Need!*

*Never Abandon a Friend in Need!*

*DON’T FORGET*

*RULE 0!*

Big, red, erratic writing stood out in front of the otherwise neatly written page.

*THEY LEFT*

*ME*

*BEHIND*

Scoutmaster Myres gave a disapproving shake of his head. *Did I… abandon everyone? Why… would I…?*

Riley was suddenly thrown off of the side of the mountain. They rapidly reached terminal velocity and could only helplessly watch as they fell closer to the ground. They couldn’t cry. They couldn’t scream. It didn’t matter. Nothing would stop the inevitable. They deserved this. They left everyone behind.

They accepted their fate and closed their eyes as they neared the ground.

But…

Nothing happened. In fact, it felt like they had stopped falling, too.

They opened their eyes and immediately shot up in a cold sweat. They were back at camp. The sun had just started to rise above the horizon and the campfire was still faintly crackling. Everyone was still asleep. Well, everyone except Jamie and Riley. *Great timing to have a nightmare, I guess.*

Speaking of Jamie… where *did* they go? After a quick scan of the camp, Riley spotted Jamie staring out at—*wait… where’s the fog?* The wall of fog that was once there was now gone, which left behind… more of the mountain to climb. *Fuck. I guess that question’s answered now.*

Just as quickly as Riley’s motivation spiked the night before, it crashed down with the newfound revelation. They really didn’t know how to feel. They really thought that was it. Just… climb a small mountain and leave. That’s it! But no, there’s just more to climb. Who knew what would happen at the next peak? Maybe more would spontaneously appear? *What a sick joke.*

They rubbed their eyes and rose from where they laid. They took a few steps towards Jamie, but stopped to look back at Luna. Surprisingly, they remained undisturbed. *Maybe they were really tired… Can’t blame ‘em. Yesterday was a busy day.*

They continued their trek onward. Jamie glanced back after they heard Riley's footsteps, but said nothing. They instead returned their gaze back to the mountain ahead of them. They exhaled a defeated sigh and sat down. They gave Riley another glace, which Riley took as an invitation to sit beside them.

As soon as Riley sat down, they felt the need to apologize, for some reason. "Jamie, I'm s—"

Jamie finished their sentence for them. "Sorry. Why?"

That was a good question. *Why* were they sorry? "I… I thought… we'd be free. But now? I feel like I've just… failed us all, somehow."

"Lemme ask you a question. Were you the one to put this mountain here?"

"…No?"

"Then stop apologizing already. Because…" Jamie scoffed. "Surprise! I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at whatever *sick fuck* put this here."

"But…"

"Don't even think about giving up, 'cause I'm not. We're getting out of here and beating up whoever did this, got it?"

Riley appreciated Jamie's determination in a moment like this. It was… admirable. Someone so young had such strong resolve to survive, even if their heart wasn't exactly in the right place. They never thought Jamie could be the one to pull them out of a rut, but… these kids proved to have plenty of surprises up their sleeves. Anything was possible at this point.

"Right. Let's… add it to the list of reasons to get out of here."

Jamie raised an eyebrow in confusion. "There's a list?"

"Well… my only reason to get out was for you three, but we can also add kicking this mystery person's ass to the list, too." Riley quickly cleared their throat after noticing their vulgarity. "Uh… I mean, kicking their—"

Jamie laughed at Riley's slip-up. "Oh please, Riley, I've heard worse. And besides, you said nothing about me saying 'naughty words.' Who cares? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"I care. It sets a bad example. And I said nothing because it's not my place to control how you talk."

Jamie rolled their eyes. "Whatever you say." A few moments passed before they spoke again. "Oh, it might be a good idea to check out what we're working with here." They shook their head. "Already looks *preeeeetty* gnarly from a first glance, though." Riley nodded and focused intently on what was ahead of them.

Jamie was not kidding when they said it looked gnarly. It was certainly a change of pace from what they had dealt with before. The worst they dealt with on the shore was the occasional

urchin and jellyfish, but this? This was a complete nightmare in comparison.

The biome ahead was a redwood forest with giant mushrooms and extraordinarily tall trees. Some of the trees had vines and bridges connecting between them, and the others had platforms built upon them. A handful of these platforms had luggage, but from what Riley could see, it'd likely be dangerous to go for them. They couldn't make out much else because of all the foliage and… mysterious red clouds?

A tired voice came from behind the duo. "I figured there would be a catch…" It was Jade, and while they were not as expressive as Jamie, their disappointment was just as apparent. To make matters worse, Luna was right behind them. They didn't say anything, but waved at Riley and Jamie. They both responded in a similar manner.

Jade sat to Jamie's left and allowed Jamie to lean their head on their shoulder. Neither of them told Riley to leave, but they assumed that the two of them wanted a moment alone. They stood up and motioned for Luna to follow, to which they complied.

The two of them returned to the campfire and sat in silence. There really wasn't anything to say. Riley wanted to tell Luna that everything would be okay, but they weren't even certain of that anymore. The words slipped past their grasp, so instead, they wrapped an arm around Luna. It probably didn't mean much in the moment, but they wanted to believe it did. Luna returned the gesture and let out a content sigh. Maybe it did mean something after all.

After a few more minutes, Luna broke the silence. "I'm… I'm okay, really. Just… a l-little sad about…" They pointed towards the next part of the mountain. "...that." They raised up a pinkie to Riley. "P-Pinky promise! Y-You can't b-break those!" They softly giggled.

Riley interlocked their pinky with Luna's. Pinky promises. That was something Riley had learned about when they were younger. They didn't really do them now, but they still knew that it was a serious gesture. Luna had a point though. You couldn't break a pinky promise.

"Oh, Luna?"

"Y-Yeah, Riley…?"

"I'm gonna tell Jade and Jamie once they're done too, but… please… stay close. I have a bad feeling about what's to come."

Luna's eyes widened in horror. "W-What do you mean!?"

"Wait, no! I just mean… there's a lot of trees and some strange looking clouds. It's probably going to be very easy to get lost. I just think we need to stay closer so none of us can be separated."

"O-Oh! I… thought y-you meant like—"

An awfully familiar voice—Jamie—chided in from behind Riley. "Oh, like, I dunno, *zombies*?"

Jamie suddenly darted past Riley with their arms raised up like a zombie, and grunted and groaned as they ran towards Luna.

“Z-Zombies?! Aaaaah! Noooooooooo!” Luna jumped up and ran away from Jamie. Their laughter betrayed the act of fear that they tried to put on.

To Riley’s surprise, Jade popped up beside them. “Hello—” Riley jumped at the sudden contact. Jade took a step back. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Riley smiled at Luna and Jamie roughhousing. “Looks like those two are in a better mood now.”

Jade returned to Riley’s side. “That would appear to be the case. It looks like it’s rubbing off on us, too.”

Riley didn’t respond. Instead, their mind started to drift back to their nightmare.

Was it a bad omen? Did those pages they found yesterday have something to do with it?

Scoutmaster Myres *did* hold up a page that looked eerily similar to the other pages. The theme of “never abandon a friend in need” being repeated on that page stood out to Riley. Maybe Scoutmaster Myres *really* hated the idea of scouts abandoning each other, even in death?

It made sense. It was rumored that he was abandoned by his troop and presumed to be dead. Of course, his troop survived to tell the tale. Maybe that’s why he went after Riley in their nightmare? They had no recollection of ever abandoning the children, nor would they ever think about doing such a thing, but… clearly they had. It had to have been a warning.

A hand popped into their view and waved in front of them, but they failed to process it as such. It began to wave more erratically at the lack of response. When it was met with no response once more, it decided to slap Riley across the face. That was what got their attention. It turned out to be Jade’s hand.

After being snapped back to reality, Riley noted that Jade had a concerned look on their face. Luna and Jamie were still roughhousing, but Jamie had pinned Luna to the ground now and emulated biting them. Luna was in the midst of a laughing fit despite the unfortunate predicament they were in.

Riley once again looked at Jade with a hint of befuddlement on their face. Jade was immediately apologetic. “Sorry for doing that. You zoned out and didn’t respond, so I… didn’t exactly have a choice.”

“It’s… okay. Sorry. Just… thinking.” *Yeah. Thinking. Good one, Riley.*

It seemed that Jade didn’t buy that excuse, based on the unamused look on their face. “There’s more to it than that. Just be honest with me, please.”

Riley sighed. They didn’t really *want* to retell the nightmare, but… they needed to. At least, so someone else could know. “Scoutmaster Myres. Remember him?” Jade nodded, prompting

Riley to continue. “Right. So… I had a nightmare. About him, I mean. Saw and felt some interesting stuff. I was alone on some hill, then he grabs me and shows me a page that repeated Rule 0.”

“Rule 0… that’s ‘never abandon a friend in need,’ correct?”

Riley nodded. “Yeah. That’s the one. Anyways, he seemed pretty upset that I was alone, then picked me up and threw me off the mountain. He looked kinda… disheveled? And he looked more like a monster than a human. Maybe it’s some kind of warning to stick together?”

Jade hummed. “Maybe. We probably shouldn’t find out regardless. If he looks or acts even remotely close to what you saw…” They shuddered at the thought. “Well, let’s hope we never find out.” A small yet warm smile crept onto their face. “Thank you for trusting me with this, Riley. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Riley returned their gaze towards Luna and Jamie. The two of them were splayed out on the ground, smiling and laughing. Truthfully, Riley never got to see this side of Jamie, and based on Jade’s reaction, they likely hadn’t seen it in a while.

Jade let out a wistful sigh. “They haven’t been this happy in a long time. Uh, Jamie, I mean. They… also haven’t really had any kid take this much interest in them, either. Usually, anyone that comes up to them ends up just walking away. They’re… not the greatest at making friends.” That same small smile once again crept onto their face. “I’m glad that Luna has broken through to them, even if it wasn’t entirely by choice, given the circumstances.”

The younger duo had been talking about something until they noticed the elders watching them. They stood up and ran over to chat. Jamie was the first to speak of the two. “Who would’ve thought I’d make for a badass zombie?!” Luna laughed, then chimed in with their own input. “Y-Yeah! Uh, you’re… r-really good at it!”

Jade hummed. “You’re good at a lot of things, Jamie, but I’ll add being a zombie to the list. Just, uh, don’t actually turn into one, okay?” Jamie rolled their eyes in response.

Riley couldn’t help but smile at their antics. It was likely that neither child really had the opportunity to “have fun” for a long time, so it made them happy that both of them got to experience it. However, it was time to go. The day was still young, but they didn’t want to spend that time idle. Especially not with the knowledge that *he* could be around.

“As much as I enjoy hearing about you two having fun… unfortunately I think we need to leave.” Both Luna and Jamie whined in disappointment at the news. To no one’s surprise, Jamie was vocal about it. “You’re so boring…” They blew a raspberry at Riley. Nevertheless, they did end up cleaning up after themselves.

With all of their belongings in hand and children in tow, they began the trek down the opposite side of the campsite. The redwood forest was rather intimidating, but as long as everyone stuck together, they’d make it out alive.

Out of the corner of their eye, they saw a silhouette lurking behind a tree. They couldn’t make out all of the finer shapes, but it looked eerily similar to… *no. It can’t be.*

*Scoutmaster Myres.*

# Chapter 8: A Dangerous Detour

Chapter Notes

Changing to Jamie's POV starting with this chapter!

As the group trekked down towards the *super* dangerous forest, a lone vine caught Jamie's attention. It connected from a small plateau to a tree with a platform. Was it super dangerous? Sure. Would it be super badass to climb across and impress their frie—*they're not my friends*—fellow scouts? One thousand percent yes.

Fortunately, Riley had decided to take charge—*finally*—which left Jamie with plenty of opportunities to slip away. As soon as the group passed by the plateau, Jamie slipped away and quickly jumped onto the vine. Despite its appearance, it wasn't thorny at all. In fact, it felt pretty nice!

Jamie only made it halfway across when they heard their name being shouted from below. They decided they'd dangle from the vine with one hand to get a better look at who it was. Unsurprisingly, both Jade and Riley appeared to be annoyed—*what a surprise*—and Luna appeared to be freaked out. The words they were all saying were nearly indecipherable. Jamie almost frowned when they saw Luna's reaction. *Am I seriously feeling bad for that kid?* They shook their head and blew a raspberry at the group before continuing onward.

A small breeze of wind brushed by them, but they paid no attention to it. Not long after, they made it to their destination. Though, there was a slight issue. The end of the vine hovered roughly ten feet above the platform. They *could* land that fall, but—*oh, who am I kidding? This is awesome!* They let go of the vine and landed gracefully on the platform on both of their feet. They gave themselves a small clap before a rush of embarrassment suddenly washed over them.

They scanned the platform from where they stood. Nothing immediately stood out to them, aside from the worn down boards holding the platform together. *Dangerous. Cool! Just how I like it.* It wasn't until they walked around the tree that they noticed a large suitcase laying down. *A suitcase? Here? Huh. Neat.*

Just as they were going to open the suitcase, they heard hurried steps and shouting from the other side of the tree. "J-Jamie!! W-Where are—o-oh! Uh, h-hi!" *Great. The last person I wanted to be up here.* Jamie groaned then stepped away from the luggage. Luna paced nervously. "Uh… hi, Luna. Who invited you to my awesome tree house?"

"Uh, I… I g-got scared, so I…" Luna looked back at the vine, then at Riley and Jade—now even angrier—then back at the vine. Their eyes widened in horror as they realized what they had done.

“Climbed across *all by yourself* despite the grown-ups telling you no, right?” Jamie stepped up to Luna’s right and gave them a pat on the back. “Congratulations! You’re learning how to become a rebel, like me!”

Luna started shaking more than they usually did. “N-No, I… I d-didn’t w-want t—” A sudden gust of wind cut Luna off. This time, it was strong enough to knock both of them off of their feet.

Without a second thought, Jamie scrambled to their feet and grabbed Luna’s hand. They hadn’t intended on doing that. They weren’t about to let go, though. They used their other hand to grab on to a stray branch and silently prayed that it’d do the trick.

Sure enough, the wind eventually died down, allowing the two to detach from the tree. However, neither child made an effort to return to what they were previously doing. The wind had startled Jamie, probably enough for them to reconsider being up there. *Okay, maybe a little too dangerous.* They felt a tight squeeze around their hand. *Oh. Right. Luna.* Luna made it clear that they were not disconnecting any time soon.

Jamie sighed before finally detaching from the branch. “As much as it sucks to leave… this might be too dangerous, even for me.” They expected a response from Luna, but they heard nothing. They turned around to see Luna, who was beyond scared and on the verge of breaking down into tears. A twang of guilt overwhelmed Jamie for just a moment. “…Yeah. Maybe we should get down from here.”

They spotted some kind of fungus jutting out of the tree just beneath the platform. They dragged Luna along, who offered no resistance, to find an opening. Luckily, there was a hole just above the fungus. Jamie stood above the hole and looked at Luna, who gave a hesitant nod.

For a moment, Luna allowed Jamie to let go of their hand. Jamie then jumped into the hole and landed on the fungus. It was firm, but soft at the same time. It appeared to be safe to stand on, so Jamie waved for Luna to jump down as well. Luna climbed down to the fungus and almost immediately after landing on it, they grabbed Jamie’s hand once more.

For a moment, Jamie considered pulling away from the contact but… it felt wrong in the moment, even if they weren’t really comfortable with it. *Consider this your lucky day, Luna.* They instead tightened their grip just a little bit before they returned their focus to their next move.

To their front was a thick branch. It was just a few feet down and wide enough to fit the two of them, but it’d barely leave them with any safe space. Behind them was yet another fungus, though it was a bit more of a fall than the one they were on now.

“GO BEHIND YOU!” Jamie snapped to the source of the sound. It came from Riley, who was at the base of the tree with Jade. Jade appeared to be just a little more irritated than usual. “THE FUNGUS! THERE’S A WAY DOWN FROM THERE!”

Jamie groaned. “Jeez, you don’t gotta yell! I can hear your loud mouth just fine without you hollering!”

Riley responded with a death glare. “I’m really not in the mood for your attitude right now, Jamie. Get. Down. Here. *Now*.”

Jamie shuddered at Riley’s sudden switch-up. They’d never seen this side of Riley before. Though, to be fair, they also never pissed Riley off enough for that. They only tested their patience a few times and made some snide remarks. Completely disregarding their orders though was a whole new level of bad.

Luna stifled a sob then gave it their all to speak. “D-Do… d-do you t-think w-we’re in… t-trouble…?”

*No shit we’re in trouble.* Jamie sighed. They weren’t particularly excited about that. “Yeah… for sure.” Luna started crying on the spot almost immediately. *You really can’t handle being in trouble, can you?* Jamie crouched down to once again be on their eye level. *I can’t believe I’m saying this, but here goes nothing…* “Look. If they give you any crap, I’ll get ‘em off of you, ‘kay?”

Luna wiped their nose across their arm. *Gross.* “B-But…”

“You have a believable excuse. I don’t. You’ll… be fine, maybe.”

Luna cocked their head in confusion. “W-What do y-you mean…?”

“Well. I went across for the hell of it, and you went across because you were scared, right?” Luna nodded. “Right, so… if you had two kids in front of you with those excuses, which one would you be least likely to get angry at?”

“Uh, I w-wouldn’t g—”

“Okay… let me rephrase it, then. Which one would you be more likely to believe?”

Luna hesitated for a moment. “T-The… scared… one…?”

“Exactly. So…” Jamie stood up and offered a hand. “Let’s go. No point in crying over it.” Luna stared at the offered hand in confusion for just a moment before they grabbed it. They allowed Jamie to pull them up. Again, Jamie considered pranking them. *Why does it suddenly feel so wrong to think like that…?* They shook that thought from their head. *Ugh. Stupid kid. Stupid forest. Stupid EVERYTHING!*

Once Luna rose, Jamie once again dragged them along to the opposite end of the fungus. Just as Riley had pointed out, there was another fungus for the two of them to jump down to. Just like last time, they both landed on it without a problem. Luna appeared to be gaining confidence, though they also appeared to be very scared still.

However, as Jamie peered over the edge of the fungus, they came across a pretty big issue: there was no way down from there. They did see the ground, but it was a pretty high drop and would most definitely break something. They didn’t even want to think about what kind of trouble they would be in then, or… abandoning Luna.

Luna hadn't noticed the problem yet, but was growing concerned that Jamie had once again paused. As much as Jamie wanted to tell them the truth, they had a feeling that would be the worst thing to do. They'd freaked out over something less insignificant just moments ago, who knew how they'd react if they knew they were stuck?

It turned out that Jamie wouldn't have to worry about that, because Riley spotted them in their predicament. "Hey! I, uh… crap. I'm sorry. I didn't know that was a dead end… guess that's why you're in charge of climbing, Jamie…" They tapped their chin for a moment, before they caught sight of something out of Jamie's line of sight. They pulled out and revealed a fungus that looked almost identical to the one Jamie and Luna were standing on, but smaller.

"You know… as soon as I grabbed this, it felt like some kind of magic was flowing through it? Dumb, I know, you can mock me later for it, but… maybe if I…" Riley threw the fungus at the tree with all their might. To everyone's surprise, it exploded into a much bigger fungus that had embedded itself into the trunk. "Well, uh, you two have a way down now." Jade was entranced by their own bewilderment of what unfolded.

Jamie looked back at Luna, who only shrugged in response. They were still nervous, but noticeably less tense now that they knew they weren't far off from safety. Without further hesitation, the two of them jumped onto the newly grown fungus, then onto the ground.

Almost immediately after Jamie and Luna landed, Riley and Jade ran up and scooped up their respective kid. Much to Jamie's discontent, they pushed Jade away before they could smother them in hugs. *That's enough physical contact for today, thank you.* Jade seemed to be saddened by the notion, but chose not to pursue it any further.

Riley sighed. "Alright, now that our heartfelt reunions are done… would either of you care to explain *why* you did that?!" Luna almost immediately flinched at Riley's frustrations which only fueled Jamie's irritation more. *Okay, seriously, what's wrong with me?*

"Look. If you're gonna be angry at anyone…" Jamie glared at Luna. *You owe me a marshmallow for this, Luna.* "Luna's not the one. If it weren't for me being stupid… they wouldn't have followed. They're too… caring… for their own good." Luna eased up just a little bit.

Riley and Jade looked back and forth between Jamie and Luna for just a moment. Jade shrugged their shoulders, while Riley shifted their focus towards Luna. Luna tensed up, but Riley gave them a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "If what Jamie said is true… I can't exactly be mad at you. But… please… don't do that again. I was *scared* I'd lost you…" Riley looked at Jamie. "Both of you. I'll save you both the lecture, since this isn't really the place to do it, but…"

Jade finished Riley's sentence for them. "Do better. Please. I…" Jade sighed. "I was worried about losing you two, as well."

A heavy feeling of guilt weighed on Jamie's heart. They hated it. They hadn't felt this for such a long time, and now it returned in the worst possible place at the worst possible time.

They knew why they felt that way. They disappointed Jade and put Luna in danger. Yet, they didn't want to acknowledge it. Things were easier when they ignored their true feelings.

Jamie was snapped out of their thoughts when Jade placed a hand on their right shoulder. "Look, Jamie… as much as I want to be upset, I'm just glad you came around and made the right choice in the end." Jade looked back at Luna, who was considerably warmer and back to their normal self around Riley. "You could've let Luna fend for themselves, but you didn't. I think both them and Riley appreciate you for that."

*Heh. Appreciate? Who? The kid that caused another kid to be put into danger? The kid that is reckless and mean and stupid and—*

"Jamie. It's okay. I forgive you."

And just like that, the walls Jamie had forcefully placed around themselves for *years* collapsed. Without a second thought, they threw themselves into Jade's arms and they *cried*. All of the pain and frustration they had bottled up… they let it all go. *Forgiveness* is what got through to them. Not a life-altering event, not the aftermath, not barely scraping by. Just… forgiveness. Deep down, they knew it was just because of their stupidity today, but even deeper… they wanted it to be for *everything*, so that's what they chose to believe.

Jamie pulled back from Jade and only stared at the ground. As good as it felt to get everything out, they felt *shame* for it. How would everyone else feel about someone like them being broken down like that?

They'd find out soon enough. Luna and Riley walked up to the two of them. Luna spread out their arms for a hug, to which Jamie hesitantly accepted. While they were embraced, Jamie muttered something to Luna. "I… I'm sorry, Luna."

"S-Sorry…?"

*No point in hiding it now.* "For being so mean to you. For scaring you. For… everything, I guess."

"I-It's okay, really! I-I'm just…" Luna grinned. Jamie felt butterflies fluttering in their stomach. *Ugh.* "Happy w-we made it out alive! And, uh, y-you're not mean…"

Jamie scoffed. "Liar."

"N-No, I-I mean it! I've…" An agonizing look suddenly washed over Luna's face. "D-Dealt with worse…"

"If you say so."

Their reunion was brought to a screeching halt when they heard a groan from behind. Jamie laughed. "We just left camp and you're hungry again? Hah!"

Nobody laughed. In fact, they were all paralyzed in fear.

There was another groan. This time, though, Jamie didn’t have it in them to crack a joke. Instead, they turned around.

They were nearly face-to-face with a… scout? Though, they looked… weird. They had mushrooms growing out of them and appeared to be lifeless. The scout took one step forward towards Jamie; Jamie took one step back. They were suddenly trembling in fear too. “H-Hey! Back off!”

No response. Instead, the scout only took another step forward. Once again, Jamie took another step back and grabbed a branch off of the ground. “I-If… If you don’t step back, I’ll… I’ll…”

Without warning, the scout lunged at Jamie, their mouth wide open revealing sharp blood-stained teeth. Jamie raised the branch up in front of them as quickly as they could. Only one thought raced through their mind now.

*I don’t want to die.*

# Chapter 9: Unwanted Threats and Memories

The branch had made contact with the “scout,” though it dared not to pierce any skin. Nevertheless, it provided enough of a distraction to pause it in its tracks. Its lust for violence and blood had been replaced with confusion for just a moment, as it looked down and noticed the tip of the branch pressed up against its shirt.

The pause gave Jamie enough of a chance to make their next move. A very quick analysis of the situation gave them a couple options. One: they could run, maybe shake that thing off of them. Two: they could fight it, maybe deal with it once and for all. Instead of picking either of those options, though, they decided they’d get a better look at it. *I’m such an idiot for doing this.*

Starting with the face, it had endless pits of void in place of its eyes. It had a small, innocent smile, though it was stripped of its innocence when paired with the eyes. Atop its head were mushrooms sprouting amongst its unkept hair. *Wait… mushrooms? Like, the things I eat sometimes???*

Moving downward, it was wearing a sandy-yellow shirt and an olive skirt. It bore a navy-blue sash, suggesting that this poor soul was once an ordinary Scout. Much like its head, its arms and legs were also covered in mushrooms.

Another fact that Jamie desperately tried to ignore was that its skin was *orange.* Just like Luna. *Why did that matter?* An unwelcome feeling of dread settled in their chest after the fact. *It could’ve been Luna.* They desperately tried to shake the thought out of their head. *But it wasn’t, dummy. It’s… not them. Just some other idiot.*

Suddenly, the pieces started to click in Jamie’s head. If this scout was covered in mushrooms and looked like… this… They were hit with a shattering realization. *I think this kid’s a zombie. That’s… not good.*

They didn’t want to die or become a zombie themselves. As much as they wanted to pretend to deny it, they also didn’t want their newfound friends to suffer. Above all else, they *really* didn’t want Jade to have to live with that guilt either.

They were going to do everything that they could to make sure that none of those things had even the slightest chance to happen.

Jamie forced the branch forward, fully expecting to be met with resistance. What they didn’t expect, however, was that the branch would instead glide effortlessly through the zombie’s chest and out the other end. Furthermore, they didn’t expect it to actually *bleed,* even with the stick still in place.

Out of fear, Jamie yanked their hands, and consequently the branch, backwards as quickly as they could. It was all for naught, though. The sudden shift in momentum had caused blood to fly out from the wound, splattering Jamie’s hands and forearms in the process. To make

matters worse, blood began to pour out of the wound at an alarming rate without the stick embedded to slow it.

In response to Jamie's sudden hostility, the zombie simply looked down at the wound in confusion, then screeched out in pain and collapsed on the spot very quickly after. It laid, unresponsive and unmoving, in its own pool of blood, never to wake again.

Jamie dropped the branch and looked down at their own hands and froze when they saw the blood. The sight… all it did was dig up an extremely unpleasant memory for them. It was one that they chose to bury for so long, but now it reared its ugly head once more. It couldn't have picked a worse time to invade their mind.

…

Jamie could barely contain their excitement as they rode down the highway with their family. To their right sat Jade, who was tinkering with something on their phone. Their dad was driving and their mom was fast asleep.

They'd just turned ten a few months ago and had an excellent year in school. Their parents had promised to take both them and Jade to Disneyland in the summer if they did well in school, which they did, and they could do *whatever* they wanted there!

Well… not *exactly* "whatever," but… whatever.

They tugged on Jade's arm, who immediately looked up at them in confusion. Their mind conveniently drew a blank on what they were going to say, so they just gave Jade the biggest grin that they possibly could. Jade responded with a somehow bigger one, which spiraled into the siblings having a silent grinning contest.

Their father must've noticed the content because he let out a soft chuckle and asked the following as quietly as he possibly could. "What're you two goofballs doing back there?" Jamie and Jade froze up for a moment then returned to what they were doing initially. He simply laughed and shook his head in response.

The car rolled to a stop at an intersection. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary, so after just a moment, the car resumed moving. However, within a second, a truck was barreling directly towards them. Not a single person in either vehicle had time to react before they collided.

The last thing that Jamie remembered before being hit with darkness was that the front of the vehicle had almost been completely crushed.

When they woke up again, they were outside of the vehicle laying down on the road. They ached a bit, but they certainly felt worse in better circumstances. Surprisingly, they had very few scratches and bruising.

As soon as they sat up, they saw a horrific scene.

The car that they were once in was completely crushed in the front. To make matters worse, the person that had hit them appeared to be gone. There was not a single siren within sight or earshot, so they assumed they weren't being helped for a while. Or at all.

The next thought they had when they got up was *Jade*. Fortunately, they didn't have to worry about them for long, since Jade reappeared from the other side of the car. Jade appeared to be extremely panicked, though none of the words they said really made sense. They grabbed Jamie by the hand and dragged them to the other side of the car.

Jamie saw both of their parents propped up against a tree. Once Jamie approached them, it became very clear that neither of them were conscious. Their first thought was to attempt to comfort their mom. A lot of blood had dried onto her skin and clothes, though they made contact with some that was still damp. They stared blankly at the blood for just a moment before they reattempted to make contact with her.

At the exact moment that they reattempted to grab her, everything around them disappeared and she melted into… water? The water washed away the blood that was once on their hands, and a more familiar scene began to materialize in front of them.

…

They felt something—*tears*—drop from their face and make a small *drip* in the puddle in front of them. They quickly rubbed their face, but noticed that their hands and forearms were wet. Additionally, the blood was gone, though the light red tint in the water suggested it was recently washed off. Luna and Jade sat close by, deep concern painted on both of their faces. Riley was leaned up against a tree a little further away, seemingly keeping an eye out for threats.

They flexed their fingers then looked back and forth between Jade and Luna in confusion. "What…?"

Jade was the one to answer their question. "You… zoned out after… 'taking care' of that zombie. Luna noticed the blood on your hands and tried to ask if you were okay, but… you didn't respond. So, we brought you here to clean you up."

Jamie stared at their hands once more. The blood was still gone. "I… uh, thanks."

It was Luna's turn to ask a question. "Uh, a-are you… o-okay, Jamie?"

*Okay? I just relived the worst time of my life and you think I'm okay?*

No… Luna couldn't know. Jamie had to come up with some excuse. Jade wouldn't buy it, but they could deal with Jade later. They just needed to convince Luna.

Jamie sighed. "Not really, no. I thought I was gonna die there. And… that used to be a scout. It could've been…" This, they did feel horrible about. "It could've been…" *One of us?* "Me."

*Good enough.*

Neither Jade nor Luna responded. Jade had a look in their eyes that they knew it wasn't the full story—*what a surprise*—but held out on calling it out. Luna appeared to believe their response, so they'd backed off a little bit.

*Welp. That's enough wasting time.* Jamie dried off their hands as best as they could and cleared their throat. "It'd kinda suck if one of us turned into a zombie and bit everyone else. So… maybe we shouldn't camp here. Just, uh… trying to be safe."

Luna nodded in agreement. "Y-Yeah… I… I think we s-should just… go…." They shuffled uncomfortably where they sat. "I'll… uh, g-go with Riley and l-leave you two alone for a bit…" They stood up and returned to Riley.

*Time for the moment of truth.* Once Luna was out of earshot, Jamie hesitantly looked over at Jade, who had an unimpressed look on their face. "You… didn't buy all of that, did you." They had meant to frame that as a question, but it came out a lot flatter than expected.

Jade shook their head. "I'm afraid not. There's no way that's the whole story. Not with that kind of reaction." After a moment, a more saddened look swept across their face. "I was scared, Jamie. You… were unresponsive for a while. If you don't want to tell me, I can't make you, but…" They trailed off, but Jamie fully understood what they meant.

"...When I saw the blood on my hands, it… reminded me of…" *Please don't make me say this.*.. "It…" The wince that Jade gave in response told Jamie that they knew what they were getting at.

After a few moments of silence, Jade finally broke it. "I… I'm sorry, Jamie. I wish I knew what to say, but… I don't know." They pulled Jamie in for a side hug. "I miss them too."

As much as Jamie *wanted* to relish the moment, they really didn't want to do it here. "Can we… do this later? We're still kinda in the middle of a creepy ass forest and I don't really wanna stick around here." Jade looked offended for a split second before they took on a more understanding look on their face. "Just… don't wanna get bit by a zombie. That's all."

Jade stood up and offered a hand towards Jamie. "Agreed. Let's get moving, then. Probably shouldn't keep the others waiting for much longer." Jamie grabbed Jade's hand and allowed them to pull them up. Jamie muttered a "thanks" in response before returning to Riley and Luna.

Riley stopped leaning against the tree once they spotted Jamie and Jade. "Everything okay?" Jamie nodded, but they knew that wasn't the truth. "Alright…" They looked up at the sky and noticed the sun creeping towards the west. "Maybe we should settle do—"

Jamie interrupted them in a slightly panicked state. "Uh, w-what if we don't stop instead?" Riley immediately cocked their head in confusion, prompting Jamie to continue. "I mean… we're… in the middle of a massive forest with zombies and *who knows what* lurking in the shadows. Do we *really* want to camp here for the night, or just suck it up and keep going?"

A strong gust of wind only confirmed Jamie's fears of lingering. The group clinged onto eachother and whatever was nearby. Once the wind passed, everyone regrouped and appeared

to be slightly more on edge.

Riley hummed as they processed the information. “Hm. You have a point, Jamie. This place is… brutal. Well… can we get a raise of hands in favor of continuing?” Almost immediately, everyone else raised their hands. “Okay. We’ll just keep going, then.” *Phew. Really didn’t want to stay here for the night.*

The group continued onward, but the zombie scout returned to the forefront of Jamie’s mind. It *really* nagged at them, and they also wanted to know how everyone else felt. “Uh…” Everyone stopped and looked at Jamie, which caused them to clam up for just a moment. *Get it together, Jamie.*.. “That, uh, zombie. Pretty creepy, right?” *Great job, doofus.*

Luna shivered at the thought. “Uh, y-yeah… I… didn’t l-like that it looked like… me…” They picked at a random leaf that attached itself to their skirt.

It *did* look a lot like Luna, which only frightened Jamie more. “What if… that was one of us…?”

Riley reached out to give Jamie a pat on their shoulder. “Jamie, as long as I’m alive, nothing is happening to any of you. I might not be good at anything, but I will sure as hell try my best to keep you all alive.”

This sentiment eased up Jamie’s worries just a bit. “Yeah. I guess you’re right. You suck, but…” They gave Riley a slight smile. “You’re pretty good at keeping other people alive. I’ll give you that much.”

Riley reciprocated Jamie’s niceties with their own smile, then returned to walking without another word. Jamie felt just a little better about everything again.

After some more time, the group came across a massive tree stump. Much to everyone’s confusion, Riley randomly stopped near it and sniffed the air. “Hey… does anyone else smell that?”

Jamie smelled the air themselves. Now that Riley mentioned it… they did smell something strange. They couldn’t quite pinpoint *what* it was, but it was unpleasant nonetheless. It couldn’t have been the water, because there was none nearby. Was it another zombie? Maybe something entirely different?

Riley raised up their hand to signal for everyone to stop. “I’ll go check it out and—”

Jamie cleared their throat. Riley appeared to be annoyed by the interruption. “Hey. The, uh, buddy system. Remember when you lectured us about that? You’re du—uh, I mean… maybe you shouldn’t go alone.” They almost wanted to let the others fight over volunteering, but they were very curious about it themselves. “I’ll save everyone the headache and go with you.”

“Alright, then. Let’s get going, Jamie.”

Luna and Jade stayed behind to keep watch as Riley and Jamie approached the tree stump. The smell got stronger the closer they got, so whatever they were looking for was certainly close by. The stump itself appeared to have an opening, so they both peeked inside and couldn't believe what they saw.

Not only was the stump hollowed out from the inside, but there was a body leaning up against the interior wall. It looked almost like…

*A pilot?*

# Chapter 10: A Frustrating Discovery

A pilot was the last person that Jamie expected to find in the middle of nowhere. In most circumstances, that could've been their golden ticket out of that living nightmare. Considering the fact that the pilot was *clearly* dead though, there was no point in getting excited over the discovery. Nevertheless, their morbid curiosity yearned for answers.

From a first glance, they showed no signs of being tampered with. Their skin was a shade of red, though there were some darker patches predominantly on their right arm. Their attire was unlike any other pilot they had seen before, though. They wore a floral shirt, jeans and some old sneakers. *Was this person really a pilot? Pretty tacky outfit if so.*

Jamie noticed a bite just above the pilot's right wrist. Based on the mushrooms forming around it, it was likely that they got bit by a zombie and died not long after. *Good thing I didn't get bit, then.* The skin immediately surrounding the bite appeared to be rotting and was accompanied by an unpleasant smell. *So that's what that was.*

They spotted a folded piece of paper sticking out from the pilot's left pocket. It had something written on it, but they couldn't tell what it was from where they stood. They reached out to grab it, but much to their dismay, Riley grabbed it first and read it to themselves.

Jamie paid particularly close attention to Riley's face as they read it. They initially started out curious, but that curiosity developed into confusion, then into frustration. After reading it, they stared at the paper for a few more moments. "What the hell… That is… so messed up…" they muttered to themselves. *Must be bad.* They then offered the paper to Jamie to read, who quickly snatched it out of their hand.

They re-folded the paper to see what it said on the front.

In very neatly written cursive were the following words: *For Pilot Romero.*

*Romero*. Why did that name sound so familiar?

…

Some time after the flight took off—*and after that obnoxious orange kid fell asleep*—a slightly irritated voice came on over the plane's intercom.

"Hello passengers, this is your pilot Romero speaking. I, uh, *apologize*," The strange emphasis on 'apologize' did not fall on deaf ears. "For forgetting this message. We're going to be flying to Hawaii today. Please make sure you stay buckled up and keep your devices in airplane mode for the duration of the flight and all that stuff." They groaned before forcing a more chipper voice. "Thank you for choosing Bing Bong Airlines, and enjoy the flight!" A click indicated that the transmission had completed.

*What a strange pilot. Who waits until after they've taken off to say this stuff? Are they even qualified to fly this thing? And why the hell were they so weird about it?*

Jamie nudged Jade, who popped off an earbud in response. "Hey, uh, Jade. Am I the only one that has a bad feeling about this?"

Jade hummed. "Well, now that you mention it… I've got a bad feeling too. Maybe we're just overthinking it though."

"Hm. Whatever you say. I'm bored, so I guess I'll just go to sleep. G'night Jade."

"Good night, Jamie."

…

Jamie rubbed their chin in contemplation. *So this wasn't just some random pilot, then. It was* ***our*** *pilot. How the heck did they end up all the way here, though?*

They opened up the paper to read the contents. They almost wish they hadn't, though. They really weren't prepared for what was inside.

*If you can, crash the plane on some remote island in the middle of nowhere. I don't care which one it is. And make sure there's no survivors. If there are, at the very least, make sure that orange little shit is out of the picture. I'd hate to have to deal with them again. They're a stray I picked up and need to keep gone.*

*Once you've done all of that, just climb as high as you can and light the flare I've given you. DO NOT LOSE IT. It's blue, so I will know it's you specifically. I'll pick you up and give you payment once I know the deed's been done.*

*After all that, we go our separate ways and never speak of this again. Well… at least until the next batch of morons stroll into town.*

*-SME*

They only stared blankly at the paper for a while. They struggled to fathom the thought that someone would *pay* to get rid of four people, or why they placed emphasis on getting rid of Luna. It *did* explain how Romero ended up against the tree, though. *This "SME" must've had a lot of money to be able to convince Romero to do something as stupid as this.*

*Wait… the note mentioned a flare… where…?* Their eyes landed on a blue flare that laid to the right of Romero. *Aha!* They grabbed the flare, but noticed it had already been used. They clenched it tightly out of frustration. For a brief moment, they considered throwing it against the wall with every ounce of energy they had, but instead they just tossed it back to where they grabbed it from.

"They must've tried to leave early when they realized they weren't making it…" Riley sighed. Their eyes were locked onto the flare. "Dying was probably the best thing that could've happened to them." *You're damn right it was.*

Jamie could feel their blood start to boil. Who in their right mind would be swayed by money to leave *anyone* to die on a random island? And who would be depraved enough to even make that offer in the first place? Also, what was it with Luna specifically that this "SME" wanted them gone so badly? That was the most concerning part of all of this. *Did Luna…? **No**. Nothing they could've done would justify **this**.* They had so many questions and so few answers.

Their knuckles took on a lighter shade of yellow, so out of fear of accidentally tearing the paper to shreds, they shoved it back into Riley's hands. *It'd probably be a bad idea to tear up the only evidence we have.*

Riley hesitated for just a moment then tucked the paper into one of their coat pockets. "Well? Pretty messed up, right?"

Jamie only clenched their fists even tighter, though it wasn't because of Riley. "'Messed up'?! Yeah! I'd say it's pretty 'messed up' to pay a pilot to try to kill us *and* single out Luna!" Riley only nodded in agreement.

They knelt down and stared at Romero's cold, lifeless eyes. "You're lucky you're already dead." Their fists trembled and they felt tears roll down their face, but they didn't care. They were too angry to care. "I… I *hate* you for what you've done."

They rose up to leave. There was nothing left there that they wanted to see. It was likely for the best anyways, since based on the lighting, the sun appeared to be creeping closer to setting by the minute. They'd prefer not to be lost in the dark on top of everything else going on.

Just as Jamie stormed outside of the tree stump, a strong gust of wind nearly knocked them off of their feet. They were yanked back inside by Riley by the collar of their tank top. From within, they could hear the wind howling, though they were safe from its effects. Riley still—likely subconsciously—held on to Jamie's collar, though Jamie chose to say nothing about it.

Once the wind dissipated, Jamie attempted to leave the tree stump once more. Much to their dismay, though, Riley was still holding onto their collar. *Now* it started to get on their nerves. "You gonna let me go, or…?"

Riley let go of Jamie's collar. "Right… uh, sorry. Let's get out of here. I don't really want to stick around, and I'm assuming you don't either."

"Yeah. I don't. I'm mad enough without even looking at their face."

Jamie once again walked outside of the tree stump, but collided directly into Luna. Luna started giggling and apologizing almost immediately, but once they saw that Jamie was not reciprocating their laughter, they stopped.

Jade appeared to be slightly concerned. "You two were taking a while, and the wind spooked Luna, so we came looking for you." They looked down at Jamie and Luna, who were both still seated on the ground. "Seems like you two were doing the same."

Jamie stood up and offered a hand to Luna, who graciously accepted. They then rubbed their nose and whined at the slight discomfort it caused. *Today really isn't my day, is it?* Almost immediately, Luna appeared to be panicked. Jamie cut them off before they could say anything, though. "Relax. I'm fine. Can we get going already?"

"What did you two find?" Jade asked inquisitively.

Jamie met Jade's question with a very agitated glare. "*Nothing*. Let's go."

Jade was only more concerned by Jamie's response. "Jamie…"

"*Jade.*" Jamie growled. They *really* weren't in the mood for this. "I dunno if you forgot, but we're in the middle of a *creepy forest*. Can. We. Leave. *Now*."

Jade once again attempted to contest. "Ja—"

A gust of wind suddenly cut Jade off. They were able to grab on to a nearby tree, but unfortunately, Luna crashed directly into Jamie. Jamie was able to re-stabilize quick enough to save them both, but it still gave them quite the scare.

After the wind dissipated, Luna clung onto Jamie for a little while longer. The fear and fatigue in their eyes were very apparent. *Poor kid… You don't deserve to be dealing with any of this.* Luna eventually let go, but subconsciously, Jamie reached out and grabbed their right hand. Luna appeared to be confused initially, but then shifted more towards gratitude.

Jade sighed. "You know what? You're right. We should get going. Sorry for being pushy." Their eyes drifted down to Jamie and Luna's hands, which were now interlocked. They smiled softly at the sight. "Just… tell me when we get somewhere safer, okay…?"

Jamie didn't understand Jade's shift in expression, but they still rolled their eyes in response. "Fine. Can we leave now?"

Fortunately, Jade appeared to get the hint and nodded in response. *Finally.* Neither Luna nor Riley seemed to have any objections either, so they all headed off with Jamie leading the pack.

They didn't really *ask* to take charge, but assumed that role regardless. They didn't mind it; it gave them some time to think while also scouting out some routes up ahead.

Scouting a route proved to be a challenge, though. The trees obstructed most of their vision the higher they looked. *And those red clouds… What do they even do…?* To make matters worse, with the sun setting, they'd soon have very little light to work with.

They eventually approached a small hill they wanted to climb. They attempted to pull their left hand towards the wall to climb… but it was met with some resistance. They looked to their left and… Luna was holding their hand. *Luna? When…?*

Jamie echoed their confusion out loud. "When did you…?" They shook their head, then immediately blushed once they fully processed what happened. "Uh… Can you… let go for a minute…?" *For a minute…? What am I saying???*

Luna let go of Jamie's hand on command. "Y-You, uh, g-grabbed it earlier. I d-didn't want to say anything, b-because…" Luna looked at the ground bashfully. "I… I k-kinda liked it." Some kind of feeling bubbled in Jamie's chest, which they attributed to… *Affection. Ew. Gross.*

Jamie sighed. "Whatever. I'm gonna check out what's at the top of this hill. You coming or not?" Luna nodded eagerly in response. *What a weirdo.*

They then pointed at Riley and Jade. "You two, stay down here and make sure nothing catches us off-guard. Got it?"

"Sure, but if you wanted to spend more time with Luna—" Riley nudged Jade before they could finish. "…We'll stay down here."

Jamie chose to ignore the first half of what Jade said, instead shifting their focus towards climbing.

The hill wasn't particularly tall, so it only took a minute to get to the top. Luna was a bit slower than them, so they offered a hand, to which Luna accepted. Jamie let go once Luna made it to the top. Luna's smile faltered for a moment, which Jamie noticed, but they forced it back to where it was. For some unexplainable reason, Jamie felt a twang of guilt. They decided to reconnect with Luna, who appeared to brighten up at the gesture. The guilt faded just a little bit.

A random question popped into Jamie's head. *Why do I suddenly feel like I need to look out for Luna…?* They already knew the answer, though. *Right… this… "SME" person.*

They pushed that concern to the back of their mind for the moment. They were at the top of the hill for a reason: to find a way up. They weren't going to figure that out if they just stood around and sulked in their own head.

Out of the corner of their eye, they spotted some kind of entrance. *Maybe it's to a cave…?* They tugged at Luna's hand to get their attention. "Hey Luna," Jamie pointed towards the entrance. "Let's go check out whatever this is."

For a moment, Luna hesitated. They appeared to be… *scared? You're such a big baby. Why'd I get stuck with you?* Jamie gave their hand a reassuring squeeze, which appeared to ease their tension a bit. "Uh… y-yeah. I'll… go with you."

Jamie lingered around no longer in case Luna decided to change their mind at the last second. With Luna in tow, they arrived at the entrance and peered inside. It was a quite small cave, though it appeared to be safe from any threats from the outside. As a bonus, there was nothing hiding inside. Even if it didn't serve as any kind of path up, it was *safe* at the very least.

The idea of resting did contradict Jamie wanting to leave as soon as possible, but… they were starting to get tired. At the very least, they wanted to get off of their feet for a moment. They turned to face Luna, who was noticeably less tense once they realized it was safe. "Make

yourself comfortable. I'm gonna get Jade and Riley over here too." They motioned for Luna to go inside.

Luna gave Jamie a scared look. *Now what?* "Y-You're… not gonna l-leave me here… are you…?"

Jamie rolled their eyes. "Yes, *of course* I'm gonna abandon you in the middle of nowhere." They groaned. "*No*, you doofus! I'm just gonna shout for them! Did you really think I was gonna just dump you somewhere and run off?"

"…I-It's… happened b-before…" *Oh… I don't like the feeling in my chest I just got.*

Jamie struggled to formulate a response to that. *How **do** you even respond to something like that?* "…Look. I'm just gonna go back outside and shout for them. I'll even stand by the entrance so you can see me. How's that sound?" Luna gave a hesitant thumbs up in response, then entered the cave. "Cool. Be back soon."

Just as they said, Jamie stood right outside of the entrance and called for Jade and Riley. "Hey! I don't know if you two can hear me, but, we found a cave up here! Nice and roomy and safe from the wind!"

Within minutes, Jade and Riley scrambled up the exact hill that Jamie and Luna had. Without a word, Jade entered the cave. However, much to Jamie's confusion, Riley remained near the entrance. Riley must've noticed Jamie's confusion, so they explained why they're not moving. "I'll keep watch, make sure no zombies or *who knows what* shows up." They grabbed a nearby branch as if they were trying to prove a point. "Get some rest. Who knows when you'll have a chance to again."

Jamie didn't bother to argue with Riley on that. They definitely weren't going to say "no" to getting some rest, especially when the opportunity presented itself.

When they re-entered the cave, Jamie noticed that Luna had settled down into a corner of the cave. Jade was close by, fidgeting with a random twig they found. Luna was hugging their Bing Bong plushie tightly, but they did momentarily free up a hand to wave at Jamie. Jamie waved back in response.

They settled down beside Luna and felt a sudden surge of fatigue wash over them. They hadn't been on their feet for an unusual amount of time, though the forest had taken quite a toll on them mentally. Something rested on their shoulder, and they would've missed it had they not noticed movement out of the corner of their eye. Once they turned their head a little bit, they realized it was just Luna.

Under any other circumstance, they likely would've tried to push Luna away. Holding hands was one thing, but getting comfortable like this was another. They were too tired to care, though. *It's kinda nice, too…* Instead, they just rested their head on top of Luna's and closed their eyes.

*I'll just get a little rest, I guess. No big deal. Not like I wanna leave, or anything…*

*Yeah…*

*Just…*

…

*A little…*

…

…

*Rest…*

# Chapter 11: A Moment to Breathe

Jamie gently landed in a field of marshmallows and lollipops. The ground was very soft, yet very easy to pull apart. *Wait… **cotton candy**?! Awesome!* They pulled up a tuft of cotton candy and ate it. *Just as good as I remember it being…* Almost immediately, the patch they had pulled out reappeared, as if they never took any.

For someone that loved sugary foods, this was heaven. They could stay here forever! The only thing that would make this even better was something to drink. Conveniently, an oasis filled with Dr. Pepper appeared in front of them. They cupped their hands and drank it. *Wait… isn't that unsanitary…? Meh, who cares? This is awesome!*

They laid down near the oasis to soak everything in. They had *everything* that they loved. Well… Jade was missing, but… maybe they'd appear soon. This was the best thing that ever happened to them. Even their birthdays didn't come close. It was only fair that they got such a sweet reward after all of the suffering they endured.

Out of nowhere, a giant beetle scurried up to them and nudged them in the leg. They looked at the bug in confusion, that appeared to be irritated at their presence. *What is this thing doing here…?* A stifled squeal from their right caused them to turn in that direction, though they saw nothing. *Huh… weird.*

The beetle nudged them again, this time sending them flying into the oasis. Once they were completely submerged, they passed by specters of their parents as they sank. Jamie heard whispers of "you're a failure" and "why did you kill us" and it nearly drove them mad. *It's not true…*

The voices and specters disappeared almost as quickly as they came. It felt like *forever*, though.

The feeling of sinking was replaced by a damp, cool feeling, with something weighing in by their side. They'd broken out in a sweat, likely because of that nightmare, and felt quite uncomfortable. They blinked their eyes rapidly and pinched their left arm. The pinch left behind a slight pain. *So I'm not dreaming anymore…*

They looked to their right and spotted Luna, who appeared to be disturbed by something. Once they looked in front of them, they identified what they assumed was bothering Luna—the same beetle from their nightmare.

Jamie patted the beetle on its head and laughed at Luna. "This—" For a moment, they forgot Jade and Riley were still asleep. They lowered their voice to a whisper before continuing. "This thing is what's got you spooked? *Really?*"

Luna initially grunted in frustration at Jamie's teasing, but eventually laughed it off themselves. "Y-Yeah, how d-dumb of me… haha…" They appeared to be pained after saying that.

Jamie suddenly felt bad about teasing Luna, but decided to play it cool. “Meh. Everyone’s got things they’re scared of.” They hesitated for a moment. *Will they pick on me for this…? Guess I’m about to find out.* “Like, I’m scared of spiders. Don’t care if it’s ‘friendly’ or not. If it’s a spider, I’m gone.”

They fully expected Luna to deliver the same treatment that they received, but Luna just smiled softly instead. “I’m, uh… a-also scared of spiders… s-so…” They frowned. “I’m… I’m just a c-coward… aren’t I…?”

Jamie mirrored Luna’s frown. As much as they wanted to tease them and confirm their statement, they knew deep down it’d only hurt both of them in the long-term. *And that I don’t actually mean it…* They weren’t any good at reassurances, but they couldn’t let Luna cling onto the thought that they were a *coward* either.

Jamie hummed in contemplation for just a moment. “I think the word you’re looking for is… uh, ‘brave’?” *You’re terrible at this, Jamie…*

Luna cocked their head in confusion. “B-Brave…?”

“Yeah. I think that’s it. I mean… would a coward be sitting here in a creepy forest with a bunch of people they don’t know?”

Luna didn’t respond. Instead, they just shifted their gaze over towards the beetle, which appeared to be growing increasingly bored.

“Would they?” Jamie wasn’t taking silence for an answer.

Luna hesitantly returned their gaze to Jamie. “M-Maybe—”

“*No.* The answer is no. A coward would’ve stayed behind, hid in the wreckage and cried until things magically got better. But, surprise! Things don’t just get better without doing anything. And considering you’re here… I don’t think you’re a coward. Scared? Definitely. But you’re not a *coward.*” Jamie pulled Luna in for a side hug. They ignored the fluttering feeling rising in their chest. “I mean it. So shut up with that.”

Luna returned the hug, though they said nothing in response at first. After a few moments though, they finally spoke up. “T-Thank you, Jamie… y-you’re very nice…” *If the bare minimum means I’m “very nice” then sure, I guess I am.*

“O-Oh. Uh, are… are you okay…?”

“What do you mean?”

“Y-You, uh, seemed u-upset when you woke up…”

Jamie paused for a moment. They considered telling Luna about the nightmare, but… “Bad night, I guess. I mean… after everything I—*we* went through…” *I’m not entirely wrong with that…*

That answer seemed to satisfy Luna, since they didn't press Jamie for any further questions about it.

The beetle ended up getting bored and decided to skitter towards the entrance of the cave. Jade woke up as it passed by them and was very confused at the sight. "Is that… a giant rhino beetle…?" They rubbed their eyes and were impressed when the beetle hadn't magically disappeared. "Huh… neat."

"A… what now?"

Jade jolted in surprise when they noticed that both Jamie and Luna were awake. "O-Oh, uh, didn't expect you two to be awake too." They cleared their throat. "Anyways, that was a rhino beetle. They appear to be dangerous, but they're actually passive. Though…" They hummed. "They usually aren't that big."

Jamie took a moment to process all of that information. Jade's comment on its size was interesting, though they had a more pressing question in mind. "If it wasn't here to hurt us, then… why *was* it here?"

"Good question. I wish I knew the answer."

Jamie rolled their eyes. "Of course you—" A yawn from Luna rudely interrupted them. "Well, if it's not gonna hurt us… I guess it wouldn't hurt to get some more sleep." That was probably for the best, considering it was still dark outside.

"Well, I was going back to sleep regardless, but agreed. Rest well, you two." Almost immediately after Jade said that, they were softly snoring. *How do you fall asleep so fast…?*

Jamie shuffled a bit to get more comfortable. Luna leaned a bit more into Jamie to do the same. Jamie noticed that they were both still side hugging each other, but they weren't particularly interested in letting go. It seemed that Luna wasn't, either.

Jamie yawned, which they took as their cue to go back to sleep. "Mmm… good night, Luna…"

Luna likely responded, but Jamie slipped too far into unconsciousness to process whatever they said.

…

The next time Jamie opened their eyes, it was much brighter in the cave. *Must be morning time. Or somewhere around there.* Riley was seated just outside of the entrance nibbling on a mushroom, and Jade was nowhere to be found. *Real nonchalant about a missing kid, huh?* Luna was awake, though they were staying quiet and fidgeting with their Bing Bong plushie. However, they perked up when they noticed Jamie was awake.

Jamie put a finger up to their lips to tell Luna to stay quiet. Then they pointed over towards Riley. Luna softly giggled in response and made a zipping motion across their lips. Jamie gave a thumbs up in response then rose from where they sat.

Almost immediately, they stepped on a stray branch. It made a *snap* sound. Jamie froze and waited for what was to come. However… nothing happened. Riley appeared to be unfazed by the branch. *Are they deaf, or…?*

*Huh.* Jamie looked back at Luna, who simply shrugged. Since Riley didn't respond, Jamie resumed creeping towards them. *This is gonna be so funny…*

"Good morning, Jamie." Riley stated as flatly as possible. Jamie stopped dead in their tracks once more.

"W-What?! How did you…?"

Riley turned around with a smug look on their face and shrugged. "Dunno. Lucky guess, I guess."

Jamie huffed in frustration, then honed their focus on the mushroom Riley was holding. Riley must've noticed, because they offered an extra mushroom to them. Jamie stared at the mushroom for a moment. It didn't exactly look sugary or appetizing to them. However, their stomach growled, so they decided to snatch it without any further thought.

Just as they put the mushroom up to their mouth to take a massive bite out of it, they suddenly had a couple questions they *really* wanted the answers to.

One, was it even safe to eat?

Two, what was Luna going to eat?

Jamie forced themselves to resist the urge to eat the mushroom for the moment. "…Hey, Riley." Riley hummed, which Jamie understood as their cue to continue. "Is this safe to eat?"

Riley stared at Jamie in bewilderment. "If… it wasn't safe to eat, Jade wouldn't have given it to me, nor would I have given it to you."

"Wait… Jade got these?"

"Yes." Riley nodded. "That's why I'm sitting here. I'm keeping an eye on them while they find some food nearby while also keeping an eye on you two while you slept."

*Well, that's one question answered… but…*

"What about Luna?" *Did I really just say that out loud?*

"Oh! Right. Here—" Riley looked in their lap but appeared to be panicked when they found nothing there. They quickly regained their composure, though. "I'll… uh… figure something out for them." They muttered angrily under their breath, though Jamie couldn't make out the words.

Jamie stared at the mushroom in their hands very intently. A few of thoughts swirled in their mind. They could hoard it for themselves—*I am hungry after all*—or they could give it to Luna, instead. They didn't stand to gain anything from giving it to Luna, though at the same

time, the thought of eating it in front of them made them feel guilty about even thinking about it.

They walked back to Luna and sat down beside them. Almost immediately, Luna caught sight of the mushroom that Jamie held. In response, Jamie offered the mushroom to them. They reached out to grab it, but stopped just inches away from it. Jamie pushed the mushroom forward, but Luna only pulled their hand back.

Truthfully, Jamie was confused at how Luna was acting. *Clearly* they were hungry, why were they refusing to eat now? Jamie pushed the mushroom forward once more. Luna folded their hands in their lap and smiled at Jamie rather than make an effort to grab it.

Jamie's patience started to run thin. "You hungry or what? I don't feel like playing games with you right now."

"I-I'm, uh… uh, y-you're hungry… you eat…"

It took every ounce of energy in Jamie's body not to get angry. "It's clear that you're hungry too. Why do you have to be so damn difficult about this?"

Luna flinched at Jamie's final remark. "I… I'm sorry… I'm f-fine, really!"

Defeated, Jamie sat down beside Luna and stared at the mushroom again. Suddenly, an idea popped into their head. Why couldn't they just split the mushroom and share it? *It really took me that long to figure that out…? Idiot.*

They pulled apart the mushroom as Luna watched. It wasn't a perfect tear, but it'd work. They held up the two halves to analyze the size of them. *I should give myself the bigger half because of this headache…*

Contrary to their inner thoughts, they offered the bigger half to Luna. "Problem solved. You're welcome. Now *eat.*" Luna *finally* grabbed their half of the mushroom and began to nibble on it.

Jamie scarfed down their half of the mushroom almost immediately. It didn't do much to satiate their hunger, but it'd at least hold them over for a little while longer. It was rather bland, but given the circumstances, they weren't about to complain. Food was food no matter the taste, at the end of the day.

They continued to stare at their lap. They didn't really have anything to do, and Luna was preoccupied with their food. After all, it'd be rude to watch someone eat, right? They picked up a random twig and fidgeted with it for a moment, but immediately got bored. Having nothing to do *sucked*. Not being able to do anything about it sucked even more.

*I know it's rude, but…* They peeked over at Luna, who was… not eating the mushroom? They were simply staring at it. They *had* taken a few small bites out of it, but they appeared to feel guilty about eating it. *What a weird kid.* Jamie must've been staring for too long, because Luna's confused eyes met theirs, and awkward silence followed after.

Luna was the one to break the silence. “Uh… is… is there s-something on my face…?”

Jamie’s face felt hot from embarrassment. “Uh, no. No. Sorry. Just, uh, looking. Yeah.” *Great job, Jamie! You killed it!*

“Oh… okay!” Luna resumed staring at their mushroom.

“I, uh, do have a question for you though.” Luna once again looked at Jamie. “Are you… not hungry, or…?”

Luna held out the mushroom to Jamie. “Y-You… want it?”

Jamie waved their hands in front of them. “No, no! Just… you’ve barely eaten it. I don’t want your food. I gave it to you for *you* to eat.”

“I… I’m just…” The look on Luna’s face made it seem like it’d hurt them if they said what they wanted to say.

“Not hungry?”

“N-No! I am, but…”

“But?”

“Just… not used t-to being g-given food, I guess…”

That truly took Jamie off-guard. “What… do you mean by that?”

“Uh… w-when I… lived alone—”

“You lived *alone*???”

“Y-Yeah… b-but, uh, I… didn’t r-really get… food… I had to…”

*Looks like I’ll have to fill in the blank here…* “Steal it…?”

Luna looked away in shame. “Y-Yeah…”

“Well, on the bright side, you don’t gotta worry about that with us.”

“What…?”

“I mean, you don’t gotta steal, or… be alone, anymore. I’ll be nice and not intrude on your past, but…”

Luna suddenly embraced Jamie. “T-Thank…” Luna stifled a sob. “Thank you…”

Jamie returned the hug and clutched Luna tightly. Luna trembled in Jamie’s grasp, then sobbed silently. They *really* wished they could do something to make things better, but… they couldn’t. They felt helpless, and they *hated* it. The next best thing they could do was to just be there in the moment and reassure them for the future.

“Hey, uh… Luna?” A soft hum was all that Luna could manage. “I’m, uh, sorry. For… whatever happened. But…” Jamie paused. “Don’t, uh, let all of that drag you down anymore. You’ve got us now.” Luna’s grip tightened in response.

Luna eventually pulled away and returned to eating their mushroom. They quickened their pace, but still took plenty of time to finish it. Once they were done, they gave a shaky smile to Jamie and rested their head on their knees. *I guess they’re not in the mood to talk anymore…*

Jade returned shortly after, which prompted Jamie to get up and investigate. However, Luna didn’t follow. Jamie offered a hand, which Luna stared at warily for just a moment before accepting. They felt bad for making Luna feel like they had to get up. “Sorry, but… I think it’s about time to go.” Luna nodded solemnly in response.

Jamie didn’t know the full picture of Luna’s past life, but with all of the pieces they *did* know…

Well… whoever did all of this to them was certainly going to have hell to pay, and they were going to see it through to the end by any means necessary.

# Chapter 12: A Lesson in Mycology

By the time Jamie and Luna made it over to Jade, they were in the middle of a conversation with Riley. Though, they did take a moment to wave, which also prompted a wave from Riley. Jamie and Luna returned the gesture with their own waves. Almost immediately after, some mushrooms from inside Jade's backpack caught Jamie's attention.

Most of the mushrooms appeared to just be the ones Jamie had already seen plenty of times, though there were some colorful ones that caught their attention. There were both red and yellow mushrooms with some kind of pattern on their caps. The red ones had spots, while the yellow ones had swirls. They wondered if they tasted as good as they looked.

Jamie must've been looking at the mushrooms for too long, since they managed to catch Jade's attention. Jade placed the backpack on the ground and fished both a red and yellow mushroom out of it. They then held one in each hand and stuck them out, not as an offer but as a display. "I'm guessing you two are interested in these?"

Without missing a beat, Luna immediately hummed an enthusiastic "mhm" and Jamie nodded. It seemed like they both *really* wanted to learn more about those strange mushrooms. Jade's soft smile turned into a much wider grin after the pair responded. *It's been a while since I saw them smile like that…*

Before Jade could speak though, Riley butted in. "You know, this would actually be a good lesson for those two to work on their Mycology badge."

"Oh, right! I, uh, actually just got that one recently myself." Jade tucked the colorful mushrooms back in their backpack.

Riley clapped. "Oh! Well, congrats! That one was a bit of a rough one for me." Jade beamed at the praise. "Well. Don't let me distract you any further from teaching those two." Riley returned to watching out for threats, though they remained within sight and earshot of everyone.

Sometime during that interaction, both Jamie and Luna sat down beside one another, eager to learn more about those colorful mushrooms. Jade set their backpack down and sat down beside it.

Jade clasped their hands together. "Right. So, what do you two know about mycology?"

Luna tilted their head in confusion. "M-My… cology…?"

"Uh…" Jamie *really* wanted to say something snarky, but they chose not to. "I'm gonna be honest, I don't even know what that is."

Jade hummed. "Mycology is the study of fungi, which includes mushrooms, like the ones you two ate earlier."

They moved the backpack to rest between them and Jamie and Luna. “You’ve probably already noticed, but I’ve come back with a bunch of mushrooms. Both plain mushrooms and some colorful ones.”

There were, in fact, colorful mushrooms. There were plain ones too, but those didn’t catch Jamie’s interest as much as the former. Just as they observed before, there were only red and yellow ones, though they didn’t know why. It seemed like Luna was curious about that too, because they decided to inquire about it. “Uh… w-why are there… only r-red and yellow ones…?”

Jade hummed. “Good question! I’ll answer that soon, but… I should probably tell you what these actually *are*, first.”

“They’re mushrooms, duh.” Jamie scoffed. “I think anyone would know that without even thinking about it. Just look at it!”

“Hmm. Not quite.” Jade shook their head. “They’re actually shroomberries.”

Jamie was very bemused by that name. “Shroom… berries…?”

“Correct. The ‘shroom’ part stems—” Jade giggled at their incidental pun. “—from the fact that it looks like, well, a mushroom. The ‘berry’ part is because they taste and are colored like berries.” They tapped their chin. “Though… I can’t quite figure out what the correlation is between the color and their effects. Like… wouldn’t a blue shroomberry be good… because blueberries are good… and the color green is generally a good color, but it’s bad here—” They were interrupted by Jamie clearing their throat. They immediately appeared to be embarrassed once they realized they’d been rambling. “Oh… sorry.”

Jamie shrugged. “Meh. It’s fine. So, now that we know *what* they are, will you answer Luna’s question about only bringing back red and yellow shroomberries?”

“Right. Of course. There’s five different colors of shroomberries: red, yellow, purple, blue and green. Red and yellow are always safe to eat, while blue and green are never safe to eat.”

Luna appeared to be perplexed by something. “W-What about purple…?”

Jamie butted in before Jade could answer. “Lemme guess. *Sometimes* they’re safe to eat?” Jade simply nodded in response. “And how did you figure that out?”

“Remember when you laughed about that one page saying something about pooping your pants if you ate a bad mushroom?” Jamie giggled again at that phrase. Jade was clearly unamused. “Seriously. I know it sounds silly, but… do you think people automatically know whether or not something is safe to consume? It’s all trial and error until it’s done and documented.”

“What if you come across something that hasn’t been documented? Then what?”

Jade shrugged. “Either try it out yourself and document it or don’t take your chances. Though, you’ll probably not be thinking about that in a life-or-death scenario.”

“What do they taste like?”

“Huh? Oh, the berries?” Jamie nodded in response. “The red ones are sweet, the yellow ones are tart and the green ones taste sour. The blue and purple ones are deceptive, because they both taste like grapes. You know, something that you’d assume is good.”

Jamie drooled at the descriptions of each berry. *Sweet… berry… give it to me…*

“*However!*” Jamie was suddenly snapped out of their daze. “We should *really* try to conserve these as much as possible.”

Luna raised their hand, to which Jade nodded. “W-Why should we save them…?”

“Well, like any other food we’ve come across, it’s not exactly a commodity out here. Furthermore, it’s not really easy to find something that’s actually *safe* to eat. Though… you two probably know that by now.” They paused in anticipation of further questions, but their face lit up as if they remembered something extra. “Oh! One more thing. They each have their own effects when consumed. So, might be worth holding on to them unless we absolutely need to eat them.”

Jamie cocked their head to the side. “Effects…?”

“Yes. The type of effect correlates with the color of the mushroom. The safe mushrooms will always have a positive effect, while the bad mushrooms will always have a negative effect. Purple is a bit of a toss-up because it could be either good or bad. Nobody has figured out the pattern behind the effects though, because it changes between person, even with the same color.”

Luna once again raised their hand. “O-Okay, but… what are the effects…?”

“The positive effects include faster running and climbing, curing any sicknesses or hunger and improved stamina. The bad effects, on the other hand, include temporary blindness, unconsciousness, or a slow and painful death in the worst case.” Luna shivered at that final effect. “So, try not to eat the blue or green ones if you can help it.”

This information was quite intriguing to Jamie. Not only were these “shroomberries” tasty, but they also had effects attached to them. *Interesting.…* Though, they had one more question. “So, uh, where do you even *find* them?”

“These type of mushrooms, you will only find in forests like this. They prefer the damp and roofed environment, so they’re a bit tricky to come across in the wild.” Jade sighed wistfully. “I wish I had a camera right about now… this would be cool to show to the other scouts.”

The three of them sat in awkward silence for a moment. Eventually, Luna pointed towards one of the ordinary mushrooms, and inquired about those. “W-What about… these mushrooms…?”

Jade’s face lit up at the question. “These are just ordinary mushrooms, but still just as important to know about. They’re not colorful or tasty or cool, but… they can still be food, if

you get the right ones.”

“H-How would I k-know if they’re good…?”

“Well… usually by how they look. One example of this…” Jade fished out one of the pages they’d grabbed at the last campsite. They handed it to Luna, who accepted and observed the contents. “Is on that page. And yes, Jamie, it’s the one that you keep laughing about. But, that mushroom in particular is called a ‘button shroom.’ It looks like… a button. As you can see, the one with spots on it is bad.”

“A-Are there other mushrooms t-to know about…?”

“There’s one that’s always safe to eat, called the chubby shroom. You can identify it by it having a chubby base. It looks…” Jade paused as they thought of a description for it. “Kinda like a vase. You don’t gotta worry about it being poisonous. There’s also cluster shrooms, which you can identify by a bunch of smaller mushrooms being clustered together. The bad ones will have skirts just under the caps. The final mushroom to look out for is the bugle shroom. Much like the cluster shroom, the bad one will have skirts beneath its cap.”

Luna hummed, though they appeared to be a bit overwhelmed by all of the information. *To be fair, I kinda am too…* “S-So… basically, if t-there’s s-spots or skirts… it’s bad…?”

Jade gave a thumbs up and a grin. “Correct!” They noticed that Luna was a bit overwhelmed and appeared to feel guilty about it. “Uh, sorry. I realize now that was a lot of information to take in, but I’m glad you understood nonetheless.”

Jamie recalled the mushroom they ate earlier. It looked almost exactly like the one on the page Luna held in their hands. “Wait… so we ate a button shroom earlier then? Cool.”

“Y-Yeah! I think t-that’s what we ate!”

Jade smiled at the small exchange between the two. “You’re both fast learners. Keep that information tucked away and you may both walk out of this with your own Mycology badge. Might even have an easy time with it with all that we’ve seen so far.”

Luna looked down at their sash, which was still just as empty as before. “M-My… first badge?” Jade nodded in response, which elicited a wide grin from Luna. Luna was suddenly very giddy after the fact.

Jamie appeared to be less than pleased by the exchange. “That’s cool and all, but is there anything else we should know about?” Luna deflated almost immediately, making Jamie feel bad.

“Well, you can cook them, but be warned that you can’t cook the poison out of the poisonous ones. It likely won’t taste much better than it would be raw, but it’ll be a little more filling.” Jade shrugs. “Wouldn’t hurt for you two to try next time we come across some fire. Learning how to cook them is part of earning the badge.”

Luna perked up at the prospect of cooking food. “O-Oh! That… that sounds fun!” Jamie shrugged nonchalantly.

Jade put out their hand to receive the page from Luna and tucked it away in their bag once more. After sorting out the contents, they stood up and tossed the bag over their shoulders. “Well. That’s all I’ve got for you two. Hopefully you learned a lot from that.” Jamie and Luna both rose up in a similar fashion, and both gave a thumbs up in response.

Much to everyone’s surprise, Riley was close by, listening in on the lesson. They’d been leaning up against the wall. “Pop quiz!” Jamie groaned, Riley appeared to be amused by this. “So what do you need to look out for when picking a mushroom?”

Luna jumped in almost immediately. “Spots and skirts!” Riley gave them a thumbs up, which elicited an excited clap from them.

“Which shroomberries are safe to eat?”

Jamie opened their mouth to speak, but Luna once again jumped in. Jamie was visibly frustrated now. “R-Red and yellow!”

Jade seemed to notice Jamie’s frustration. They pulled out a fat mushroom from their backpack and displayed it. “*Jamie*, which mushroom is this?”

“Uh… a chubby shroom? Because it’s, you know, *chubby*?”

“Exactly! Good job, Jamie.” Jade clapped and Jamie felt slightly embarrassed at the gratification. Jade returned the chubby shroom to the backpack.

Riley pushed themselves off of the wall. “Okay. I think that’s good enough for now. Seems like you two will be cooking them the next time we find fire, so maybe we can test you again then.” Jade nodded in agreement.

Jamie let out a sigh of relief. *Finally done with this boring lesson.…* They returned to their former spot and sat crisscrossed. Luna sat close by and mirrored their position.

Just as Jade walked by the two of them, they paused. They fished for a red and a yellow shroomberry and held it out to the duo. “I know I said to conserve these, but since I made you two sit through that lesson, I figured I’d reward you. I’ll let you two decide who gets what color.”

Jamie held a special place in their heart for sweet stuff, so they nearly impulsively grabbed the red shroomberry. However, something else in their heart insisted that they give Luna the chance to pick first. From the sounds of it, they never really had an opportunity to be picky, and Jamie would’ve felt bad for taking that from them.

They didn’t know it at the time, but that’s also why they let Luna have the marshmallow back at camp. As much as they wanted it themselves, for some reason, they would’ve felt bad for taking that away from Luna.

Luna likely came to the same conclusion but for Jamie, because the two of them ended up staring at each other awkwardly for a while. However, Luna's stomach ended up growling, so they decided to end the staring contest. Their hand hovered over the yellow shroomberry for a moment before grabbing the red one, leaving the yellow one for Jamie.

Before Jade could walk away, Jamie grabbed them by the wrist. "Hey… uh, thanks. Appreciate it." Jade smiled, then walked away after Jamie let go.

Jamie took a small and hesitant bite out of the cap of the shroomberry. They weren't particularly fond of tart things, so they wanted to start out easy just in case. It… actually wasn't that bad. It was obviously tart, as described earlier, but it wasn't overwhelmingly so. The stem was rather bland, but they didn't mind. They felt a rush of energy course through their veins, though it didn't last for long. They felt a little more full after eating it, too.

They heard a sniffle from Luna, which prompted them to look. Luna had ate about half of the shroomberry, though they stopped and appeared to be sad. Jamie had a suspicion as to why they were this way. "Don't get to eat this kind of stuff often, huh?"

Luna was slightly startled by Jamie, but they shook their head in response. "I… I'm s-so used to… stale or rotten food… t-this is… nice… m-maybe I should t-thank Jade when I'm done."

Jamie suddenly felt good about letting Luna have that marshmallow at the last campsite. As much as they enjoyed having sweet stuff, they also enjoyed letting their… new friend… experience something as wonderful as that. *Are we really…?*

Luna rose from their spot, but stopped when Jamie beckoned for them. Jamie tucked away as much shame as they possibly could before asking the following question. "Hey, uh. I've been giving it some thought. And, uh, do you… uh… want to… be friends…?"

"F-Friends…?" *Oh god, I messed that up, didn't I?* Luna laughed. "I… I t-thought we already were!" *Oh. Maybe I didn't.*

"Huh. Okay. Well…" Jamie cleared their throat awkwardly. "Cool. Uh, don't let me stop you from doing whatever you were doing, then."

Luna skipped away with a smile on their face. Jamie couldn't help but let a smile creep on their own face too. Luna was a strange kid, but Jamie grew to appreciate their quirks. *They're not so bad after all…*

Luna approached Jade and gave them a hug. At first, Jade was confused at the gesture, but eventually happily returned it. They told Jade something, which Jamie was just barely able to make out. "T-Thank you for the s-shroomberry, Jade! I-It was good!"

Jade was taken aback by the gratitude. "Oh! It's okay, really. Happy to hear you enjoyed it." Luna skipped back towards Jamie after the small interaction.

Before Luna could sit down again, Jamie rose up from their spot. "Shouldn't we get going now? As much as I don't really wanna go back into the forest, I… still want to get out of here."

Riley sighed. “They’ve got a point. We should probably get going. Thoughts?” Everyone nodded or hummed in agreement. “Great. I’ll be outside waiting when you’re all ready.”

Jamie took another look around the cave as Jade and Luna went on ahead. Even though it was dark and the floor was hard, it *did* shield them from the dangers outside. In that regard, they were comfortable inside it. However, as much as they weren’t ready to face whatever was out there again, they were ready to go home.

They walked to the opening of the cave, then paused for a moment. With a deep sigh, they stepped out of the comforts of safety and back into the unknown.

# Chapter 13: Unexpected Allies

Aside from the occasional chirp from what Jamie assumed were bugs, the forest was relatively quiet. The tension of a zombie flanking any of them unexpectedly was still very much lingering over the group. With the little bit of rest and comfort they got, they felt as good as they were going to get. They *really* wanted to just hide in that cave a little longer, but they weren't going to make it home if they did that.

Unfortunately, Jamie failed to do any proper scouting prior to spotting the cave the night before, so they didn't have a great read on what was ahead. Nevertheless, they silently fell into place leading at the front of the group. In a way, it felt empowering knowing that everyone wanted them to take charge without even having to say anything.

Their next course of action then was to map out a path up. Not necessarily to the *top* of the mountain, just *up*. However, nothing really stood out. Parts of the mountain was obscured by some mysterious red fog, and other parts were obscured by the trees. What they *did* see appeared to either be a dead end or simply unreachable from where they were.

They were shoved out of their head by a sudden gust of wind. As much as they'd grown acquainted to it, they'd grown to hate it too. Not only did it completely distract them from what they were doing, but it often came with the risk of displacing them and possibly even injuring them as a result. Not to mention the feeling of helplessness when both them and their fellow scouts had to cling onto something for dear life and hope it'd hold them in place.

Shortly after the wind subsided, a loud crash was heard in the distance. Everyone frantically looked around to see if it was something nearby, though nothing appeared to be out of place. Nevertheless, tensions were heightened and they all only wanted to get out sooner.

After some time, Jamie spotted what appeared to be a battered path off to their side. It looked quite sketchy with the mysterious red cloud nearby and what looked like some lumps on the ground. Though, they didn't exactly have many options, either. They faced their group and pointed over at the path. "Let's go this way."

Luna looked over towards where Jamie pointed and was immediately visibly distressed by what they saw. Though, in spite of how they felt, they hesitantly gave a thumbs up. It seemed that Riley and Jade were waiting for Luna's response, since the two of them only approved after Luna did.

"Cool. Let's go—" A familiar skitter stopped Jamie in their tracks. "Then…?" Another rhino beetle was hurriedly charging towards Jamie. They sidestepped out of the beetle's path in anticipation of an attack, but instead, it stopped directly in front of them. It appeared to be panicked and scurried around Jamie erratically.

Jade hummed. "Looks like it's upset about something. Why don't we try to figure out what it needs?"

Jamie glared at Jade. “Seriously? I’m trying to get us out of this place and you want to help a *beetle*?” They shook their head in disapproval.

Jade sighed. “With… all due respect, Jamie… I don’t think anyone *actually* wants to take that path. And, who knows? Maybe helping this beetle means it’ll help us.” Luna nodded in agreement, though they appeared to feel guilty for it.

Jamie took another look at their proposed path. To be fair, it *did* look really sketchy. They’d already been taking enough risks with the zombie encounter and all of this wind. It was entirely possible that nobody was particularly interested in taking even more risks. In any other situation, they likely would’ve said something along the lines of “suck it up” and taken the path anyways. This was… not any other situation, though.

They returned their gaze to Jade and groaned. “Ugh. *Fine*. Let’s help this beetle, *then* we leave. Got it?”

“Got it.” Jade smiled.

Jamie looked down at the beetle, which stopped once it noticed it was acknowledged. It suddenly turned around and began scurrying off in the opposite direction, occasionally looking back. Jamie reluctantly followed the beetle with their companions in tow.

After a few minutes of walking, it stopped in front of a tree that had collapsed. *Maybe this is what that crash was earlier…?* It then turned around and looked up at Jamie expectantly.

The tree was presumably blocking a path, since it appeared to create a complete dead-end. Well, a dead-end for the beetle, anyways. It wasn’t high enough to prevent Jamie and the others from stepping over, but it was simply too high for the beetle to overcome.

Unfortunately for the beetle though, the tree appeared to be too heavy to move, even if all four of them gave it their all. Jamie echoed this thought to the rest of the group, who appeared to be saddened by the news.

However, Luna’s face lit up as they got an idea. “W-What if… you just p-pick it up and t-take it over to the o-other side…?”

Jamie had a completely dumbfounded look on their face. “Huh. Guess I never thought about that.”

They then crouched down to scoop the beetle up. It initially was startled by the gesture, but quickly settled into Jamie’s arms. It was actually quite light despite its size, so they had no complaints with carrying it.

They stepped over the tree and set the beetle down on the other side. The beetle waddled and appeared to be appreciative of the gesture. They then turned around and began to vault the tree, but the beetle made a small chirp, prompting them to turn around. It once again walked forward, occasionally looking back.

Riley rubbed their chin. “Maybe it wants us to follow it?”

“Nnnnope! I helped it, so now we’re leaving. That was the agreement.”

Luna sniffled. “B-But… it’s so c-cute! W-We can’t just leave it now!”

“Don’t care. Let’s go.”

Luna pouted at Jamie’s insistence and put on the most *pathetic* display of puppy-dog eyes that Jamie ever saw. There was *no* way that was going to work on them… and yet…

Jamie sighed. “*Fine*. You win. Happy?” They and the remainder of their group dropped down from the tree and returned to the beetle.

Luna’s face lit up and they clapped at their own daring act of manipulation. As much as it frustrated Jamie, they couldn’t help but also respect Luna for that. They seemed so friendly and naive on the outside… but clearly they had their own tricks up their sleeves too.

For a while, the group walked in complete silence. Only the sounds of footsteps and distant skittering filled the air. The trees grew more plentiful, which ended up being beneficial because the wind seemed a lot less intimidating when it blew through.

After some time, the trees started to become sparse once again. Near the point where the path started to widen, the beetle stopped, turned around and shook its head. It then turned back around and continued, only to stop and shake its head again when Jamie attempted to follow it. Jamie was confused by the gesture but made no further effort to follow it.

Jade opened their mouth to speak, but Jamie promptly cut them off. “Nah. I think I got this. It wants us to stay here, I’m guessing?” Jade nodded. “Cool. Guess we’ll wait, then.”

The beetle seemed to appreciate that Jamie got the hint. It scurried off then returned after a few minutes with a purple shroomberry. It was rather dirty since it had been rolled around on the ground, but perhaps they’d come across some water later to rinse it off. Once Jamie picked up the shroomberry and lodged it into one of the handles on their belt, the beetle once again took off.

After another minute or so of walking, a massive opening revealed itself. Within the opening were a lot of beetles that looked exactly like the one they’d been following. Once one beetle caught sight of the new visitors, every single beetle turned to look. This act made Jamie feel *extremely* uncomfortable.

Maybe the beetles were “cute” and “friendly” on the outside, but the scouts were massively outnumbered and could easily be overwhelmed. Jamie couldn’t count exactly how many there were, but there were certainly more than four.

A handful of beetles attempted to approach the group, but the beetle that lead them to the opening stepped forward to interfere. After a few little waddles from each beetle, they all backed off. Consequently, every other beetle that was observing also backed off just a little bit, even if they were farther away.

Jamie let out a breath they didn't realize they were holding. It was far from the scariest moment of their life, but they would be lying if they said they hadn't felt tense that entire time.

Out of the right corner of their eye, they spotted some more movement. Once they turned their head to get a better view, they noticed several beetles were moving out of the way to create a new opening. Their guide beetle then headed towards the opening, so they followed behind it. As they got closer, they randomly glanced upwards and figured out *why* the opening was being made.

A bunch of large fungi was conveniently laid out along the side of the wall to lead up to what they could only assume was the top. It almost seemed *too* convenient, but they weren't going to pass up on an easy way up now!

Once they reached the wall, the beetle stopped and turned around once more. It looked up at Jamie, though it did nothing more. For some unexplainable reason, Jamie decided to crouch down and give it a pat on the head. It fluttered its wings, then walked past the group. Luna smiled and waved as the beetle walked by, to which it waddled in place briefly. It then resumed walking away, eventually reuniting with its fellow beetles.

Jamie hummed. "You know what? I'll admit it. I was wrong for being a jerk about helping the beetle, considering it gave us a pretty easy way out."

Jade smiled. "I understand your skepticism, though I do appreciate you coming around. Your generosity seems to have paid off for all of us." They then rested a hand on Jamie's shoulder. "So… you're forgiven."

"W-Wait…" Luna was trembling at the sight of the wall. "Y-You're… you're not a-actually… c-considering this, are you…?"

"What?" Jade scoffed. "Suddenly scared of a little bit of climbing?" They began to laugh, though a sharp nudge from Jade stopped them in their tracks. "Sorry."

Luna shook their head. "N-No… not that… i-it just… seems unsafe?" They were picking at their sleeves now.

"Look, I'll make you a deal." Jamie held out a hand towards Luna. "If I hold your hand the entire time, will you climb up this wall?" Even though they intended on mocking Luna, their softer tone betrayed their intent.

Luna hesitantly reached out to grab Jamie's hand then nodded. "Y-Yeah… I'll… I'll do it..."

"Cool." Jamie looked between Jade and Riley. "You two got a problem with this too, or can we get going?" Both Jade and Riley shook their head in response.

Everyone climbed atop the first fungi without a hitch. It was very close to the ground, so Jamie was able to step atop it without letting go of Luna. Jade and Riley were able to climb atop the fungi too with no issues.

The second fungi was quite a bit higher than the first, though it was still a relatively short climb. Luna let go so both them and Jamie could climb up. Once Jamie reached the top, they offered a helping hand to pull their fellow scouts up.

The third, fourth and fifth fungi were also just as easy to climb. Nobody else seemed to be suspicious about it, but it rubbed Jamie the wrong way. There was no way the beetles would just allow them to take such an easy path and not have a catch attached to it. There was definitely going to be a rogue beetle waiting or a gust of wind that would decide to screw them over.

Speaking of wind, a gust suddenly came out of nowhere. Jade, Jamie and Riley all clung on to the wall as tightly as they could, while Luna hugged Jamie as tightly as they could. It didn't last quite as long as the other gusts, which they were all very grateful for.

Everyone let go, except for Luna. Jamie gave them a light nudge, but they just whined in response. *What a crybaby…* Once they gave them a harder nudge, they finally let go, their face painted with fear. Jamie gave their hand a reassuring squeeze, which seemed to ease their fear ever so slightly.

Upon climbing atop the sixth fungi, Jamie froze once they saw something they never wanted to see again. There was a zombie lying down near the middle, and a beetle was sleeping just a little farther away. Unfortunately, running wasn't the easiest option, but they *really* didn't want to fight the zombie either. Irrational fear washed over them, rendering them immobile and non-verbal.

"Is everything alright up there, Jamie?" Jade inquired, their tone laced with concern. When Jamie didn't respond, Jade climbed up. "Did you not hear…" Jade's eyes landed on the zombie. "…me… Oh." The zombie still remained dormant, though Jade placed themselves between it and Jamie.

Suddenly, the zombie woke up!

Once it spotted Jade and Jamie, it immediately charged towards them. Jade went into a more defensive stance, fully ready for an attack. However, the beetle also woke up and spotted the zombie. It charged towards the zombie and completely caught it off-guard. It rammed its head into its side, sending it flying off of the fungi and into the forest below.

For a moment, it stood there and did nothing, but upon noticing Jade and Jamie, it became hostile again. However, once it spotted something, it stopped. It calmly walked past Jade and up to Jamie and nudged them softly on their left ankle. It looked up at the purple shroomberry that they had on their belt and did a little waddle at the sight of it.

Jamie was still frozen in fear, so they hadn't entirely registered everything that was going on. It wasn't until Jade pinched them that they were snapped out of it. "Huh? What… where did the…" They looked around frantically for the zombie, but it was nowhere to be seen.

They then looked down at the beetle, which was waiting patiently. "Oh. Hey there." The beetle continued to stare at their belt. Jamie hovered their hand over the shroomberry. "Want this?" The beetle's face lit up, which Jamie took as a 'yes.'

They placed the shroomberry down and the beetle immediately rolled it into the crevice it once rested at. It laid down and began to nibble on the shroomberry, no longer interested in anything else in the world.

Luna and Riley climbed up shortly after and smiled when they saw the beetle. With all of the immediate threats subdued, Jamie set their sights upwards again. The fungi was starting to come to an end. *I feel like there's still a catch.…* They started climbing once more with everyone close behind them.

The remainder of the fungi did not pose any issues. Once they reached the top, they spotted something that they never thought they'd see again. *Smoke.* However, before they could go much farther, they tripped over something in the ground.

Once they stood back up, they turned around and saw some kind of skull. Out of morbid curiosity, they picked it up and inspected it. It was dark gray and covered in numerous cracks. A soft pink glow emitted from both the cracks and the eye sockets. They could very faintly hear the sound of… voices? *What an interesting find.…*

They looked up to gauge how the others felt. They expected the others to be curious as well, but Riley was as pale as a ghost. Jade was quite tense as well, and Luna was a bit clueless about what was wrong.

Riley stepped forward and attempted to grab the skull, but Jamie pulled back. "You… you need to put that down… *now*."

Jamie stuck out their tongue at Riley. "Or what? You gonna *ground* me? Ha—" A small gust of wind suddenly knocked it out of their hands. Riley attempted to grab the skull, but they barely missed it. Neither Jade nor Luna were fast enough to respond either.

Almost immediately after the skull came into contact with the ground, it shattered into several pieces.

# Chapter 14: The Second Camp

They all stared at the pieces of the skull in complete silence. Jamie didn't feel any different after the fact, but they had a feeling that they *probably* shouldn't have been so careless in handling it. If Jade and Riley's concerns had any merit, then…

Well, it didn't matter now. Nothing happened to them. Even if there was a chance something could've happened, they couldn't just go back and fix it anyways. They'd have to deal with the consequences now, assuming there were any.

Once Jamie looked up from the skull, they could see that Jade and Riley were still deeply disturbed. *Why* exactly, they were unsure. To Jamie, it was just some cool looking skull. If anything, those two should've been *sad* that they couldn't take it with them, not *afraid*.

Luna tilted their head in confusion. "I-Is… everything o-okay…?" They were primarily looking at Jade and Riley, though they stole a few glimpses at Jamie too.

Jamie shrugged. "*I'm* fine. Dunno what the deal is with those two though."

Jade finally broke eye contact with the remnants of the skull. "Like, you don't feel any different? At all???"

"Nnnnnnope! So I dunno why you two are freaking out over this."

"I… see." Jade eased up just a bit. "We should probably just keep going then."

"And ignore that whole part where both you and Riley freaked out over this?" Jamie sighed. "Yeah. Sure. Fine. Whatever. Let's go."

Jamie waved for Jade to move forward, who reluctantly complied. Riley gave them a look that made it clear that this would be talked about later, which Jamie dreaded, but they followed Jade shortly after. Luna gave them a confused look and they both shrugged at each other before continuing onward.

Since Jamie was tagging along in the back, they decided to go a little slower to "take in the scenery." They weren't particularly interested in sightseeing, but they *were* interested in stalling an impending lecture. With the reactions they got, there was no way they were getting away with breaking that skull.

Off to their right, they spotted a waterfall gushing off the edge and into the fog beyond. How they didn't spot or hear it while they were climbing was beyond them. The water itself appeared to be crystal clear, though it was unlikely that it'd be safe enough for them to get any. Almost immediately after, they suddenly felt super thirsty. *When was the last time I even had anything to drink…?*

There was a beetle wandering aimlessly around the source of the waterfall. It waddled when it noticed Jamie and returned to wandering once Jamie responded with a wave. As corny as it

made them feel, they were grateful that the beetle and its friends decided to help them. Who knew where they'd be right now if they chose to ignore the beetle?

Almost directly in front of them, they spotted some more mushrooms, both of the ordinary and shroomberry variety. Jade had already been picking some and putting them in their backpack. However, once they ran out of space, they took a step back. Luna picked out a couple mushrooms themselves, but put back a few that Jade disapproved of. Once the two of them noticed that Jamie was staring, they waved. Jamie hesitantly waved in response.

They didn't expect to see a whole lot behind them because of the trees, but they decided to take a look anyways. As expected, the roof of the forest made it impossible to look back down into the hellish landscape they were once in. It was probably for the best anyways, since they had no good memories in that place.

Regardless, watching the trees sway felt oddly therapeutic, so they decided to sit down and just watch them for a while. They got bored very quickly, but there was still this feeling of dread that prevented them from moving. Maybe if they stayed there long enough, both Jade and Riley would forget what upset them in the first place and move on.

They were caught off-guard by some footsteps from behind. They had fully expected Jade or Riley to be right there to capitalize on them being alone to lecture them. However, Luna was the one to join them by their side. They sat down and picked at some grass. "Uh, weren't you just picking mushrooms a minute ago?"

"Y-You're trying t-to avoid getting in trouble, a-aren't you…?"

"Answering my question with another question, huh?" Jamie sighed. "I… yeah. Yeah."

"I d-did that a lot…" When Jamie didn't respond, Luna continued. "If I w-was in trouble… I'd go s-slower and hope they'd forget… b-but it only m-made them more mad…"

Jamie cocked their head to the side. "What's your point?"

"U-Uh… I don't think… t-that doing what you're d-doing will make them happier…" Jamie once again didn't respond. "A-And… I don't t-think they're even mad at you! Just… w-worried…" *Wow, what a deal sweetener.*

Jamie groaned. "Ugh. Fine. I was getting bored looking at these trees anyways." They rose up from their spot and offered a hand to Luna, who accepted. "Let's go."

Neither of them said a word as they made their way to camp, and to be honest, Jamie wasn't really in the mood for a chat. The only thing that weighed on their mind was that they likely weren't getting away with messing with that skull. They weren't concerned about the consequences of it, they were concerned about getting an earful about it.

The camp itself was just as boring as the previous one. Near the middle was a campfire surrounded by not one, but *two* marshmallows! Both Jade and Riley held their own hot dogs over the fire patiently as they roasted. Riley waved at the younger duo as they approached, though they said nothing after and returned their focus to their hot dog.

Another backpack laid close by, but it was evident that it had remained untouched. Maybe once everyone settled down, Jamie would check it out and claim it if nobody else did. They weren't particularly excited about carrying it though so maybe they'd just pawn it off to Luna instead.

Sitting right beside the… *what was it called…* stem of a giant mushroom was another one of those crumbled and ancient looking statues. Much like the previous statue, there was a bundle of papers that had yet to be touched, so it was possible that neither Jade nor Riley took interest in it at the moment. Maybe if nobody else has checked it out by then, they'd go check it out themselves later.

They had considered asking Riley about it, but they were already sprawled out on the ground near the fire. They were still awake, but based on how they moved, it was apparent that they were tired.

Instead, they took the final marshmallow and sat beside Luna. Luna was already halfway through their own marshmallow, though they were currently struggling with it. Since it was so gooey from being over the fire, some of it inevitably got stuck to their fingers. They whined softly at their own struggles, but stopped and smiled at Jamie when they sat down.

Jamie cared not to chat, but instead enjoy the delicacy of the marshmallow in front of them. They had considered eating it as is for a moment, but they much preferred a toasted marshmallow over a cold one.

For a few minutes, there was complete silence. All Jamie could hear was the crackling of the fire and the occasional breeze. As much as they hated silence, in the moment, it was honestly *bliss*. After all of the chaos of the forest they'd just endured, they were perfectly fine with just… slowing down for a bit.

They blinked.

The marshmallow in their hands disappeared. Then the fire. Jade, Luna and Riley too.

They were thrown into the middle of a desert directly in the scorching hot sun. The ground was replaced with sand. It was quite hot to the touch, but for some reason, their body had no reaction to it. *Huh. Weird.*

All they could see in front of them were a lot of cacti with the occasional tumbleweed darting across the horizon. They could've sworn they saw an oasis as they were scanning the environment, but it had disappeared when they looked in that direction again.

*What am I doing here…?*

They rose from where they stood. Unsurprisingly, nothing different popped into view. They couldn't really identify what the "correct" way was, so they decided to just walk in a random direction in hopes of coming across something.

They suddenly tripped over something hard, though they had no time to see what it was. As they fell, the ground was replaced by an open void and they were engulfed in darkness. They

fell for quite a while before landing on something firm.

When they got up again, they tried to observe their surroundings. However, only darkness surrounded them.

They were suddenly grabbed on the shoulder. When they snapped their head towards where they were grabbed from, they saw nothing. Instead, whispers started swirling around them. They were very faint at first, though they quickly grew louder. Jamie covered their ears in a vain attempt to block them out, but to no avail.

*Please… make it stop…*

And just like that, the voices stopped.

A raspy chuckle came from behind. They again turned to search for the source.

This time, their eyes landed on a tall, lanky man. He had green skin and wore an outfit that only scoutmasters wore. His arms and legs were a lot longer than they normally would be and his clothes had definitely seen better days. There was a white glow in place of his eyes and he had a full face of facial hair.

They attempted to ask who he was, but to their surprise, nothing came out of their mouth. Instead, it just relayed in their head. *Who… are you…?*

“Scoutmaster Myres.” Myres offered a hand for Jamie to shake. Much to his dismay, they chose not to shake his hand. He pulled it back. “Do they not teach kids like you to respect your elders anymore?” He sighed. “Never mind that. It is so nice to meet you, Jamie!”

*How do you know my name…? (And… why did that sound so sarcastic?)*

“It’d be rather unfortunate if I didn’t know the names of the scouts that fell vict—ah, that I’ve met, no?”

…

“Hm. Well. I won’t keep you for much longer then. Though, I do have a warning for you.”

He suddenly ran up to them and picked them up by the throat. They had no time to react, nor the strength to fight back. Instead, they squirmed helplessly in his grasp.

“With what’s next to come… *One wrong move and you will kill your entire troop. Do* ***not*** *be reckless.*”

They closed their eyes and accepted their fate as he slammed them to the ground. Almost immediately after, they let out an exasperated gasp as more familiar sounds and feelings rematerialized around them.

The ground turned back into a more comforting grass. The fire in front of them was still alight and crackling. It seemed like they dropped their marshmallow *and* snapped the skewer while they were out. Jade kept glaring at them with the occasional side-eye, but they didn’t

actually say anything. Riley was sprawled out on the ground, inattentive to everything around them.

*There's no way I'm back here after all of that… this has to be another trick…*

They pinched their own arm really hard. It left behind a stinging pain, which did dispel the theory that this was a trick. They were alive and well and back in the company of their friends, which did alleviate some of their tension. Though, they still had one question.

*What was that all about then…?*

Suddenly, Luna set their hand atop Jamie's right hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Jamie hesitated for a moment, but did eventually return the gesture. Such a simple—*and stupid*—gesture helped ground them and ease their anxiety just a little more.

Jamie staked what remained of their skewer back in the ground and looked solemnly one more time at the marshmallow that was now covered in sand. Not only were they not able to enjoy a sweet treat, but a lot of things were weighing on their mind. First with being forced to relive their parents' deaths, now whatever this "Scoutmaster Myres" wanted from them.

Maybe breaking that skull *did* have some effect and it only reared its ugly head now. Or… they were just wired up and paranoid after what they went through back in that forest. They wanted to believe that was the more reasonable theory, anyways. Why would breaking some random skull suddenly make them hallucinate about some dead scoutmaster?

They were broken from their thoughts by a yawn from Riley. Riley *finally* acknowledged everyone else's existence. "Well. If we're not going anywhere for a little while, I'd like to *finally* get some rest. Anyone got a problem with that?"

Jamie scoffed. Maybe if they tried to lighten the mood, they'd feel a bit better. "Jeez. It's mid-day and you're already tired? C'mon, you're really just old."

Riley was clearly unamused. "Some of us didn't get a chance to get a good night's sleep in that forest." Jamie noted that Luna shrunk in on themselves after that jab. "And, if you think 24 is old…" They sighed. "Whatever. Good night." They dropped back down onto their back and fell asleep immediately.

Jade scooted the backpack to be directly behind them and they leaned back on it. They stared at the fire for a moment before shifting their gaze directly to Jamie. Jamie felt a chill roll down their spine, but they couldn't quite pinpoint *why*. It was hard to read Jade in the moment.

"I think I'll get some rest too while we're stopped. You two don't wander off too far without us." Their eyes moved up towards the sky. "And, uh, Jamie? I know you don't want to, but I think we need to talk later." *Of course…* "But… until then, good night." Just like Riley, they fell asleep almost immediately.

And then it was just Jamie and Luna remaining.

Without a word, Jamie rose from where they sat and relocated to in front of the fog wall. Much like the last camp, it veiled what was ahead. They were really hoping that it'd eventually reveal a way out for them, but unfortunately, they didn't put a whole lot of faith into that.

What it would probably *actually* be was what they had seen in that vision. If it was really legitimate, then they should expect to be dealing with a desert next. They hoped—at the very least—that it'd be a lot easier to navigate than they were shown. They also hoped that none of their friends would meet a brutal ending there either.

On the other hand though, it was just a vision. They had no way of actually proving whether or not it was true, nor did they have any incentive to believe anything they saw. Whoever—or *whatever*—gave them that vision was definitely trying to capitalize on the paranoia they already had and get under their skin.

They weren't really going to find out either way until the fog decided to recede though, so there was no point on dwelling on it now.

After another minute or two, Luna sat down beside them with a handful of Thick Mints in their hands. Jamie was left starstruck at the sight. "Since when did you have Thick Mints???"

"I, uh…" Luna looked down at their hands in guilt. "Uh…"

"Stole them, didn't you?"

Luna said nothing, but the slight nod they gave confirmed as much.

Jamie gave Luna a hard pat on the back—maybe a little harder than they should've—and laughed. "Nice! I knew you had it in you. But, uh… *who* did you even get them from?"

"Uh… J-Jade found them in t-the forest and said t-to save them for a s-special occasion…" Luna's eyes finally met Jamie's. "Y-You, uh, seemed p-pretty upset earlier and I t-thought surviving the forest w-was special… so…"

Jamie tilted their head in confusion. "They had Thick Mints?"

Luna nodded. "I g-guess so. M-Maybe they found them w-while we were asleep and… t-tried to hide them from you… they said s-something about you l-loving these…" They chuckled softly and popped one in their mouth. They waited until they were finished eating to speak again. "I… I can see why. T-These are good!"

Jamie cupped their hands expectantly. "Well? You gonna share, or what?" Almost immediately after, Luna dropped some in their hands then went back to eating their own.

For a few minutes, Jamie slowly nibbled on the cookies. Under any other circumstances, they likely would've inhaled them almost immediately, but they weren't sure if they'd get to eat these again. These *were* their favorite cookies after all. It'd be a shame to not enjoy them when they're so hard to come across.

Jamie dusted off their hands once they were finished with the cookies. “Thanks. And yeah, they’re pretty good. I guess I’ll share with you if I have to.” Luna smiled in response.

They laid down on the ground and looked up at the sky. They never really noticed it before, but it was strange how the fog wall went all the way up to the sky. Any clouds that passed through it were immediately veiled and not a lot of light passed through from the other side. For a moment, they wondered if they could even walk through it, but they weren’t interested in testing that theory.

They felt Luna’s arm brush up against theirs, prompting them to look to their right. It seemed that Luna mimicked their motions and laid down beside them. In spite of the predicament they were in, they seemed fairly content and at ease for once.

“So, Luna. Whaddya think will be behind this fog?”

Luna hummed in contemplation. They went silent for a minute before finally responding. “Uh… h-hopefully a h-helicopter or plane or something… I w-wanna leave…”

“Yeah… I hope that’s what it is too… but I doubt that’s what it’ll be.” Jamie once again recalled the vision they saw earlier. “Hm. Maybe… a desert?”

Luna echoed those last two words. “A… desert…?”

“I mean, maybe? Just a guess. Could also be a tundra too. Who knows?” ***You*** *know, idiot. That was* ***definitely*** *a warning for what’s next.*

“I-It’s a good guess! Not… q-quite as good as a h-helicopter, but…”

“Nothing we can really do about that.”

“…Yeah.”

The conversation promptly ended after that. The two of them were once again side by side in silence. In a way, it was… nice. Nice that they’ve met someone their age that they have grown to appreciate and… like? And as far as they could tell, Luna reciprocated those feelings.

Jamie remembered when Luna assumed they were already friends. They really had no reason to make that assumption, especially with how Jamie had been treating them, but they decided they were friends anyway.

A small smile managed to creep onto Jamie’s face. They had a *friend.* Maybe not exactly by choice, considering they were all stranded together, but… a friend, nonetheless. Luna was a bit weird but… Jamie didn’t mind. Not anymore.

Stars slowly began to creep into view as the sun grew ever-so closer to the horizon. Jamie took that as their cue to make their way back towards the fire. However, as they rose up, Luna grabbed them by the arm. They looked at Luna, confused.

“C-Can we… just s-stay here for the night…?”

Jamie sat there and gave Luna's question some thought. They would miss out on the comforts of the campfire, but…

"Oh, what the hell. Sure, why not?" They then returned to where they laid.

Luna let out a sigh of contentment and closed their eyes. Their chest steadily rose up and down as their breathing stabilized. This was probably the most relaxed that Jamie has ever seen them. They were usually quite anxious, but now? They were at ease.

Jamie felt a bit odd for watching them as they fell asleep, so they decided to just lay down themselves and look up at the stars. They still felt quite uneasy following the forest and that vision, but it was probably for the best if they got some sleep. Who knew how tomorrow would look?

They closed their eyes, and for the first time in a while, they were able to fall asleep without nightmares haunting them.

# Chapter 15: Overthinking It, As Usual

The next time Jamie woke up, they were greeted not by a gruesome nightmare, but by the sun. With the kind of vision they'd seen the night before, they fully expected to be haunted in their sleep too, but it never actually happened. Instead, they felt somewhat rejuvenated and ready to go. They ached from not having a proper bed, but they were getting used to it.

For a moment, they considered staying put and watching as the clouds passed by. However, they had yet another day of climbing ahead of them, as well as that… *talk*… that Jade wanted to have with them. They weren't particularly excited about doing either of those things, though they didn't really have any other options at their disposal.

As much as they wanted to avoid the talk, they needed to get it over with. If it was anything like the previous talks they've had with Jade, it'd *probably* go fine. Jade was never a particularly angry person. In fact, they were usually understanding and sympathetic. That didn't stop Jamie from dreading it every time, though.

After a moment of hesitance, they lifted themselves up off of the ground and—*Wait… so it was true…*

As expected, the fog receded at some point during the night to reveal their next challenge. What they weren't expecting, however, was to actually see a desert. *Maybe that Scoutmaster Myres guy was actually trying to help me then?* Many of the details they saw in the vision were also present in the desert. However, something that they didn't see before was a giant hole in the ground. Maybe they'd take a detour to investigate it if the opportunity to do so arose.

Luna was still fast asleep to their right. They had forgotten to hide the box of Thick Mints they stole from Jade the night before. They also forgot to wipe all of the evidence off of their face and hands. For such a cautious and stubborn eater, they appeared to be quite messy when they did eat.

Jamie considered sneaking the box back into Jade's backpack, but they decided against it. Maybe they'd want some cookies later which would be a challenge if they went back into Jade's possession.

However, they did want to have a quick chat with Luna. For a split second, they felt odd coming to that conclusion, but just as quickly remembered they were friends now. They did feel bad about being the one to bother them, but they didn't really have anyone else to talk to. They weren't ready to talk to Jade yet, and while Riley *was* an adult, they didn't trust them quite as much as they trusted Luna.

They gave Luna a slight nudge on the shoulder and waited patiently for a response.

After a few minutes, Luna slowly opened their eyes and blinked in rapid succession. They initially appeared to be confused—and quite possibly overstimulated—but that washed away

when they saw Jamie. They didn't really say anything, but they did smile before turning back towards the desert.

"Good morning, sunshine." Jamie *finally* returned the smile and tucked away any shame that tried to creep up. "Sleep well?"

"Mhm. D-Did you?" Luna rubbed their eyes and let out a yawn.

"Could've been better, I guess." Luna appeared confused, so Jamie clarified. "I mean, I didn't really have a bed to sleep in. So… like I said, could've been better."

The two of them fell into awkward silence after that. *Was I not supposed to say that…?* Jamie cleared their throat. "Uh… anyways," they pointed towards the desert. "Check it out. There's a desert over there now."

Luna rose to see what Jamie was pointing at. Almost immediately after their eyes landed on the desert, their smile quickly switched to a frown. "Oh…"

Jamie winced at how their entire interaction with Luna had gone so far. It was only back-to-back discomfort or pain and they were growing worried. They had just become friends not too long ago and they were already messing things up.

"…Sorry." Jamie turned away. They didn't really have it in them to look at Luna anymore.

"H-Huh…? W-Why are you…" Once Luna noticed Jamie wasn't looking, they tugged on their arm to get their attention. However, Jamie refused to look. Luna gave up and continued regardless. "I-It's not your f-fault…" They then leaned their head on Jamie's shoulder.

Jamie finally turned back towards Luna, though they couldn't see their face. Regardless, if they were truly upset, they would've had a different reaction. The more appropriate description of how they felt was likely closer to "sad." Sad that the truth crushed their hopes of leaving, no matter how foolish they were.

As much as they wanted to revel in the contact and soak up the moment, they still needed to talk to Jade. They almost didn't want to break that to Luna and risk getting a third strike, but they had to regardless. "Sorry, but I guess I've gotta talk to Jade. Something about yesterday, or something."

Almost immediately, Luna moved their head from Jamie's shoulder and gave an understanding nod. They didn't say anything, instead choosing to observe a tornado that randomly appeared in the desert. They gave Jamie a concerned look, who simply shrugged, then once again looked over at the desert. The tornado had disappeared in that small window, leaving them extremely confused.

After a small laugh—which earned them an annoyed look from Luna—Jamie stood up and gave one last look at the desert. They breathed in and let out a deep sign before turning around and making their way to the center of the camp.

They didn’t spot either Jade or Riley at first, so they decided to just settle down near the now-extinguished fire. They tried to occupy themselves by fidgeting with the stake they broke the night before, though it did nothing to abate the underlying anxiety that had begun to resurface.

Fortunately, they wouldn’t have to dwell on that for long, since Jade soon joined them. “I apologize for keeping you waiting, Jamie. I wasn’t expecting you to be ready so soon.”

Jamie’s face was painted with confusion. “You… you weren’t?”

Jade shook their head. “Not after everything that happened over the past few days, no. I expected you to drag it on hoping I’d forget about it.” They eyed Jamie for a moment. “Though… I can tell you’re nervous. Is something bothering you?”

“No… just always nervous about these kind of talks…” Jamie chuckled. “As usual…”

“I won’t try to take up much of your time then. I just need a few minutes of your time and then I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing, okay?”

Jamie hesitantly nodded. “Okay…” That sounded simple enough. Just… talk it out and move on. That’s definitely all it would be.

“Great.” Jade sighed. “So, the biggest thing I wanted to go over was that skull that you—uh, the wind, broke yesterday. Maybe this is an odd question, but do you feel okay?”

Physically? Sure. Mentally? After last night? They weren’t entirely sure. They were afraid of opening up about that, though. “Okay? I mean, I’m sitting here and seem fine, right? Why wouldn’t I be—”

“You zoning out at the fire last night in combination with what Riley told me this morning suggests otherwise.” Jade glared at Jamie. “So, let me ask you again. *Do you feel okay*?”

Jamie let out a defeated sigh. They weren’t really in the mood to keep up the jokes. “I dunno. I mean, physically, I feel fine. But, uh…” Jade stared intently. “Please don’t think I’m crazy when I say this, but… I think that skull breaking did something to me. When we were sitting at the fire, some creepy guy named ‘Scoutmaster Myres’ was in my head and showed me something.”

Jade hummed. “So… exactly what Riley was worried about.”

“You’re… you’re not gonna question why he’s there?”

“You’re not the first to tell me that.” Jamie’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Riley’s been dealing with him too. So, no, I’m not really questioning it anymore.”

“Of course they’d somehow mess up too…” Jamie shook their head.

Jade rolled their eyes at the remark. “I suppose that leads into my next question then. You mentioned him showing you something. What did he show you?”

Jamie shuffled in their seat anxiously. “I saw the desert. Kinda like the one over there.” They pointed over towards the desert. “Though, this one seemed kinda endless. Eventually, I tripped over something, like I did over the skull. I couldn’t see what I tripped over though, because I fell into complete darkness. I heard a lot of screaming, but then it randomly stopped and was replaced by laughing. Then he showed up, told me not to be reckless or I’d get everyone killed, and after that…” They considered commenting on him nearly killing them, but chose not to. “I was back at the fire.”

Jade hummed as they processed the information. That *was* a lot, after all. “So, if I understood all of that correctly, he warned you on both what’s ahead and to be cautious then?” At least they seemed to understand.

“I guess so. He didn’t actually hurt me or make me feel more tired or anything, so I don’t know how to feel about all of this…”

“Perhaps it’s just that for now: a warning. From what Riley told me about their nightmare involving him and what we already know about him… he seems to get unhappy if anyone gets left behind. So, maybe if we stick together, nothing will happen…?” Jade appeared to be a bit uncertain of themselves.

Jamie hummed. “Makes sense, I guess. I mean, if he wanted to hurt me, he would’ve already done it, right?”

Jade nodded. “Right. And he could’ve hurt Riley by now too, considering they’ve been cursed for longer.”

They both sat in silence for a while. They weren’t entirely sure *how* to carry the conversation forward, but it felt awkward to end it on that note. Jade *did* mention Riley several times, but never really elaborated on *why* they did. Maybe they could ask about that?

“Hey.” Jade looked at Jamie in anticipation. “Quick question, if it’s okay.” Jade nodded. “So, uh, you keep mentioning Riley with all of this. What do they have to do with this?”

“Good question.” Jade trailed off for a moment. “They mentioned having a nightmare about him back on the beach and seeing him occasionally since then. It only felt appropriate to consult with them about all of this.”

Jamie wasn’t really following. “But what do they know that you don’t?”

“The fact that something was definitely up with that skull. It appeared to be inactive to me, but to Riley, it had some… spirits? Flowing out of it and screaming. Its eye sockets were lit up too.”

Jamie lit up at the reminder of what they had seen. “I saw that too! It was pretty cool! You seriously didn’t see any of that?”

Jade shook their head. “No. So, we’re assuming that those that are cursed also gain a keen eye for cursed items.” Jade sighed. “And… as ‘cool’ as it may be, we really shouldn’t be messing with stuff like that, or…”

“You end up with two morons that are cursed.”

“*Jamie…*” Jade growled. They *hated* when Jamie talked bad about themselves.

Jamie shrunk in on themselves immediately. “Right… sorry.”

Jade let out an irritated sigh, then continued. “Anyways, that’s the reason why I kept mentioning them. They have a better idea about this stuff than I do.”

Jamie was content with the answer they got. They weren’t entirely sure how to reply though, so they instead stared at the fire, hoping that Jade would get the hint and push the conversation forward.

It seemed like Jade got the hint, since they followed up with another question. “Did you have any other questions?”

Did they? The only thing they were confused about was answered, and besides, it seemed that Jade was asking all of the questions earlier. “Not really, no. What about you?”

Jade hummed in contemplation. “If you’re really okay like you say you are… then I suppose that’s where my questioning ends.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow. They weren’t really buying that. “Really? That’s it?”

“Were you expecting more?”

“Yeah…? Like, maybe a lecture, or…”

“I’m sorry for not meeting your expectations, then.” Jade rose from their seat and offered a hand to Jamie. “But seriously, we’re all done here if you’ve got nothing else to say or ask.”

Jamie felt a bit sheepish after that. As usual, they overthought it. Jade really just wanted to know if they were okay, but they thought they were in for an interrogation. Had they known that, they would’ve come around a lot sooner… but they’d also likely forget about all of that by the time the next talk happened, so it didn’t really matter.

They still felt a bit skeptical about how fast that went, but they grabbed Jade’s hand regardless and allowed them to pull them up from their seat. “Okay then… I’ll, uh, go hang out with Luna for a bit, I guess.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for chatting. And, uh…” Jade giggled. “Try not to eat all of the cookies before we leave.” They winked, then promptly walked away before Jamie could respond. *How the hell did they find out about that…?*

All things considered, Jamie felt better after the chat. Fortunately, it didn’t drag on for long and it really was just a few simple questions. Other than the snide remarks that Jamie made, Jade didn’t show any frustration or anger, just concern. That’s all they always showed. Jamie wondered if it was even *possible* for Jade to get angry.

They still weren't entirely sure what the implications of this "curse" were, but they weren't going to dwell on it. As long as it didn't hurt them or inhibit their ability to climb, they didn't really care too much about it. They could handle a couple nightmares and creepy visions. They've seen, and been through, worse.

They shifted their focus back to Luna. Unsurprisingly, they were still seated in the same spot as earlier. Riley was seated to their right, observing them. They were fidgeting with something, but it wasn't until they returned to Luna's side that they could actually see it.

In the time that Jade and Jamie were talking, Luna had claimed the second backpack. They had already tucked the box of Thick Mints and their Bing Bong plushie into it. They were absentmindedly fidgeting with it and didn't notice Jamie at first. However, once Riley waved at Jamie, Luna *finally* noticed and performed a similar gesture.

"I assume it went well?"

Jamie shrugged. "I guess so. All they wanted was to check on me and make sure I was okay."

Riley said nothing in return, opting to just nod in response. They got up not long after and walked off. Was everyone really just satisfied with their answers? There was no interest in probing them for more, especially after dropping that bomb?

Luna poked Jamie on their arm and offered a single Thick Mint to them. They weren't particularly interested in it at the moment, so they declined it. Luna appeared to be saddened by the refusal and dropped the cookie back into the box. They then closed the box and put it back in their backpack.

Luna raised up from their spot and suddenly ran off, presumably to find Riley. Jamie was appreciative of this, since it gave them some time alone to think about everything.

They couldn't quite wrap their head around this "curse" still, nor how Riley was *also* affected, but again, it wasn't really worth worrying over. The desert appeared to pose a formidable challenge, but they weren't about to back down from it. Of course… their friends and Jade would have to be ready to tackle it as well, since they weren't particularly interested in going alone. Not after… all of that last night.

They were ready to get moving, but they probably needed to do some clean-up as well. They learned by now that leaving any trace was frowned upon, and they weren't really interested in a lecture. So, after taking one more look at the desert, they stood up and headed back into camp to help with clean-up so they could get going. Everyone else was already beginning to clean too, so the timing couldn't have been any better.

# Chapter 16: A Lot to Think About

Jamie shuffled into camp in search of something to clean up. However, it was already mostly spotless. None of them were particularly messy in the first place, aside from Jamie's marshmallow mishap last night, so clean-up ended up being a breeze. They were okay with this outcome. Cleaning was boring, so the less they had to do, the better.

Speaking of the marshmallow, Jamie nearly stepped on it as they were passing by the fire. They weren't sure how they, or anyone else for that matter, failed to notice it sooner. Though, once they crouched down, they realized why. It was almost entirely covered by ants, so it was probably better to just leave it be and let the ants take care of it.

They recalled the statue from the night before and how it was untouched. However, it seemed like someone had messed with it when they weren't paying attention. Its head was completely missing and there were no pages like the last one had. There were some signs of tampering near the hands of it, given the imprints in the dust.

They stared at it in discontent and wondered who could've messed with it. It was unlikely to be Jade knowing how Riley got cursed, and Luna was too scared to do anything on their own, so the only other person who could've done it was Riley.

Since the statue would no longer provide them anything of value, they gave up on it and instead sought out Riley. They wouldn't have to worry about that for long though, since Riley was already approaching them by the time they turned around.

The two of them greeted each other with a small nod. Jamie then pointed towards the statue. "I'm guessing you're the one that messed with this?"

Riley nodded in response. "That would be the case, yes. I would've done it the night before, but…"

"It's because you're old!"

"You're not gonna let that one go, are you?"

Jamie couldn't help but laugh. "Nope!" They dropped the teasing not long after though. "Meh. Yesterday sucked anyways. I feel better after getting some sleep."

Riley let out a long sigh. "I didn't even deal with the worst of it, but… yeah. I've got a feeling that everything that went on in that forest left all of us drained."

Jamie wasn't particularly interested in thinking about *that* again, so they chose to steer the conversation back on track. "Anyways, enough chit chat. You messed with the statue, right? What'd you get from it?"

"Oh! Right." Riley pulled some pages from the inside of their coat. "So, I got three more pages and… something else."

That last thing definitely piqued Jamie's interest. "Something else?"

"I'll show you in a second. But, uh, the pages. The first one said something about the statue reviving dead scouts, or it doing something else if everyone was alive."

Reviving… dead scouts…? What if they had that when… No. It's not worth thinking about that now. Not like they could do anything about it anyways. They'd just have to accept that they're gone for good.

Riley continued, unaware of Jamie's thoughts. "The second page talked about huddling together when we get cold, but…" They looked over at the desert for a moment. "That's probably not useful to us right now. The final page talked about some moon-shaped fruit and I can only assume that Scoutmaster Myres ate it and went to sleep. So, maybe we should watch out for that."

"Okay… and what about this 'something else' you mentioned?"

"Right. So, when I touched the statue's hands…" Riley once again dug around in the inside of their coat, before pulling out a rope spool. However, this one was blue and floated up, rather than hanging down. "It gave me this! Seems to be some kind of… anti-gravity rope spool? Strange, but it might be useful later."

Jamie couldn't quite draw their attention away from the first page. Why were they so focused on the possibility that this statue could bring back the dead? What were the limits? Who could they revive? How does that even—

Riley waved a hand in front of Jamie, snapping them out of their thoughts. "*Hellooooo*? Are you there, Jamie?"

"Huh? Uh, what's up?"

"I asked if you wanted to take a look at all of this yourself. Maybe you'll have a better idea of what to do with this rope."

"Oh, uh… sure, I guess?"

They probably shouldn't answer any of those questions anyways. As fascinating as this discovery was, they weren't really keen on seeing anyone, especially Jade, dying. They'd already been there with their parents. They weren't ready for that again, not even with the guarantee that they could just magically come back after touching a statue.

Jamie first took the rope from Riley's hands. Upon closer examination, it made a very faint humming noise. They gave it a little bit of slack and watched as it raised into the air. They weren't entirely sure how rope would be useful if it went *up* instead of *down*, but maybe they could use it if they got stuck in a pit somewhere. They reeled it back in and gave it to Riley in exchange for the pages.

The first page was… quite ominous, to say the least.

*BONUS RULE 3*

*EMBRACE THE OCCULT*

*Wuh woh! One of our scouts stepped on a sea urchin and died!!! I was about to get really sad… but one of the other kids touched a weird statue, and brought their friend back to life!*

Both halves of the page were separated by imagery of… some weird flames? They didn't really seem like they were from a fire… so what…? They kept reading, more confused than when they started.

*Seems like this island bends the rules of mortality itself… how wacky! Perhaps something else interesting might happen if we use a statue when everyone is still alive…*

They drew their attention back to the graphic in the middle… and the mention of some "occult," whatever that meant. It probably didn't mean anything good if messing with the statue was truly the cause for Riley being cursed. Now they *really* didn't want to test if the statue actually revived scouts in the off-chance that it'd either curse Jade or Luna or somehow make theirs or Riley's curse worse.

Riley took Jamie's pause as an opportunity to provide commentary. "It's a lot to take in. Not only the fact that the statue can somehow revive people… but also give some… magical item, as we saw. Not to mention that it mentioned some kind of occult, as well as the fact that Scoutmaster Myres has been haunting us *and* that statue cursing me in the first place… gah." They sighed. "We're really playing with fire here, Jamie. Seriously. We *cannot* let Jade or Luna get involved in this."

Jamie nodded, though they didn't really understand a lot of it. "Yeah. I'm gonna be honest, I wasn't really following any of that or whatever the page said… but… yeah." They then tucked away the first page behind the others and proceeded to the second.

*BONUS RULE 4*

*HUDDLE UP!*

*As we approach the PEAK, the temperature has begun dropping dramatically. Seeking constant cover is a must, and getting caught out in the open when the wind is strong can be a death sentence.*

As if the text and massive rule text weren't descriptive enough, whoever wrote the page was gracious enough to depict two scouts huddling together while freezing to death. But… it did mention some kind of "peak." Did that mean that there was really some end goal here…?

*If all else fails, huddling with your friends to share body heat might just save you from an icy grave.*

"Well, that's kinda useless considering we're about to head into a desert."

Riley shrugged. "Maybe it'll get colder as we get closer to the top?"

Jamie rolled their eyes. "Really? Because it just seems to be getting hotter the higher we go." They shook their head. "Whatever. It mentioned some kind of peak, so does that mean we

really have a chance at going back home?"

"Assuming we survive what it throws at us, sounds like it."

Satisfied with Riley's answer, Jamie continued to read the final page.

*BONUS RULE 5*

*I JUST NEED A NAP…*

There was a drawing of a moon-shaped berry surrounded by sparkles. However, the artist appeared to fall asleep before they could finish the drawing, considering a line strayed away from the berry and went through the text beneath it.

*I saw such a pretty sight… a beautiful moon-shaped fruit surrounded by fireflies…*

*I feel so relaxed now… maybe a nap wouldn't be so bad…*

They thought it was a bit funny that the line strayed away, as if it was trying to drive home the point that this berry would put them to sleep if they ate it. It was nowhere near as interesting as the first page, but if it gave them information to help them out… well, they weren't really going to say no, were they?

"That first page kinda made the other two boring, but… cool, I guess." They re-organized the pages and handed them back to Riley. "Thanks for showing me." They considered returning the rope, but decided to keep it for themselves.

Riley tucked the pages back into the inside of their coat, but suddenly appeared to be reminded of something. They then pulled out that little slip of paper that they found on Romero's body and sighed at the sight of it. Jamie felt a bit uneasy about being reminded of that again.

"I know that look on your face." *Was I making a face…?* "I'm not happy about it myself. I've been giving it some thought though, and I think I have a theory."

"Well?"

"Upon closer examination, the handwriting looked oddly familiar. I didn't identify it at first… but it looked an awful lot like Scoutmaster Edmond's writing." Riley chuckled under their breath. "And if that's the case… he did a terrible job at covering his tracks. But… like I said, that's just a theory."

They vaguely recall hearing that name before. They never actually *saw* the guy, but they did *hear* about him through other scouts. A majority of those scouts were ones that transferred out of his troop and to theirs, mostly with negative experiences. However, there was one conversation they overheard before that stuck in their mind…

…

A blue scout was sitting beside a green scout on a bench outside. They were both Rabbit scouts and were just wearing their own casual clothing. They were just two of a handful of scouts that left Scoutmaster Edmond's troop for something better.

Jamie had strategically placed themselves behind a nearby hedge to eavesdrop on them. They likely had some rumors of their own since they came from Scoutmaster Edmond's troop, and Jamie *needed* to hear about these.

The blue scout was the first to speak. "It's crazy how much different Scoutmaster Tina is from Scoutmaster Edmond…"

"Right, like she actually *wants* to be here?"

"Mhm. And she's not a complete jerk, too."

"Like *he* was to that poor orange kid. I swear, he really seemed to enjoy picking on them in particular, and allowing other scouts to bully them too. I heard he'd often yell at them or tell them they're worthless if they did something even remotely close to being 'bad'…"

He was mean to this one scout in particular *and* let others gang up on them? Interesting…

"I don't wanna judge or anything but… they seemed kinda poor. Or homeless. I dunno. Maybe he's taking advantage of that? Doesn't help that they're also new to scouting too. They've got the standard turtle-colored outfit and all."

"…I kinda got that impression myself. If so…" The green scout shook their head. "I don't know how to feel. I kinda regret not dragging them along with me. They seemed nice."

"Yeah… I told my mom, she said she's gonna tell the headmasters. Hopefully they'll check it out or something soon."

The two of them fell into a silence, which Jamie assumed meant that the conversation was over. How unfortunate.

Jamie wasn't particularly interested in the scout themselves, but… a scoutmaster allegedly harming a scout behind closed doors left an uneasy feeling in their chest. Scoutmasters were supposed to *help* scouts, but… adults were crummy, as usual. This wouldn't be too surprising if it were true…

…

"I… heard about him a while ago."

Riley cocked their head in curiosity. "You did?"

"Yeah. Some new scouts were talking about him, and how he was cruel towards an orange scout."

Perplexion swept across Riley's face. "An… orange scout?"

“Yeah, that scout was pretty new, too.”

“New…?” Riley’s perplexion slowly morphed into horror.

“And they were wearing… a turtle-colored outfit…” Jamie started to understand why. “Which is what Luna’s… wearing… *wait.*”

“Could Luna be…?”

Suddenly, Luna’s voice popped up from behind. “Y-Yeah. T-That’s me…” Jamie nearly jumped out of their skin in response. It seemed that both Luna and Jade were eavesdropping, though Jamie couldn’t pinpoint *when* that happened.

“S-Since when were you two…?!”

Jade’s face was… indescribable, to say the least. “We got curious.” Their frown deepened. “We probably shouldn’t have come over here. For several reasons.”

Luna interjected. “W-Why are you two t-talking about my scoutmaster…?”

Jamie and Riley looked at each other with deep concern. “Riley… maybe you should…”

Riley looked at Jamie in shock. “But… won’t they…?”

“Look. It’s too late to turn back now. They’re not gonna get off of our backs until they know why we’re gossiping about them and their scoutmaster.” Jamie paused to figure out what they were going to say next. “And honestly? It’s just gonna hurt more if we keep hiding it from them.”

Luna tilted their head in confusion at Jamie’s mention of “hiding” something, though they said nothing about it.

Riley whispered something under their breath that only Jamie could hear. “*Fuck me*…” They groaned, then spoke up to where everyone could hear them. “Just, uh… here. Take a look at this. Maybe that’ll… give you the answer you’re looking for.” They then hesitantly offered the note to Luna, who took it after a brief pause.

As Luna’s eyes scanned the note, Jamie’s anxiety skyrocketed through the roof. How were they going to react? Were they going to cry? Run away? Deny it? Were they going to say anything about it? Luna’s unpredictability was *scary* in the moment.

Instead, Luna only responded with an “oh” and shoved the note back into Riley’s hands.

“H-He wants me…” Luna scoffed. “A-And I was s-stupid enough to think he’d… he’d…”

Jamie frowned at the ‘stupid’ comment. “You’re not stu—”

“Shut up. Leave me alone.” That was the coldest that Luna had ever sounded. Jamie dared not to push them any farther. “I deserve this.”

Luna clenched their fists for a moment. Their scowl was replaced by an incredibly forced smile, their tone matching it. “Let’s go! We have a lot of climbing to do!” They then headed towards the desert without waiting for anyone.

The three of them scrambled to their feet and chased after Luna. As much as they wanted to comfort them, it was abundantly clear that they were closing everyone out for now. That *really* was a terrible time for Luna to find out, given how harsh the desert seemed. Jamie was really hoping that everyone would be feeling great so it’d go smoothly… but they’d have to live with the consequences of this now.

They’d have plenty to think about between the pages and the confirmation that SME is, in fact, Luna’s scoutmaster.

# Chapter 17: Into the Desert

Chapter Notes

> Switching to Jade's POV for this section of the fic! I'm assuming it's obvious by now, but in case it isn't: a new biome brings a new POV.

Jade wasn’t entirely sure how to feel after all of *that*. After the forest, they’d been made fully aware that someone was trying to discreetly kill, or at the very least, get rid of Luna. However, they didn’t expect it to be a scoutmaster, let alone *Scoutmaster Edmond*.

They’d heard rumors about Scoutmaster Edmond in the past, but they always dismissed them because they knew rumors could hurt innocent people. Anyone could’ve been rough around the edges on a bad day, and more serious claims were dangerous to spread without substantial evidence. Jamie may have scooped up those rumors early to get in on it, but Jade was far more cautious about it.

From what they heard from eavesdropping on Jamie and Riley’s chat as well as what was on the note, they weren’t sure how to feel. They couldn’t really dismiss any of the rumors anymore since Luna confirmed them to be true. In a way, they felt bad about not doing something about it sooner, but at the same time they didn’t know how bad things really were then.

They were *completely* wrong about him, it seemed. They didn’t really think of him a lot before, but they didn’t think he was like *that*. They simply couldn’t fathom the thought of an adult in that position treating a vulnerable child like that. It didn’t sit right with them. And yet, it happened anyways.

Luna was in pain, that much was evident. Even if they were trying their best to hide it, the signs still slipped through the cracks. Their random outburst towards Jamie, their sudden shift into being cold and silent and acting fine told Jade everything. They were hurting and pretended like they weren’t.

That seemed quite odd though. Jade’s impression of Luna was that they were the type of kid to put their heart on their sleeve. So why now would they act contrary to that? It didn’t make sense…

As much as Jade wanted to let their big sibling instincts kick in, they knew from experience that they’d have to be patient. Maybe Luna would come back around soon. Right now, there was no point in pushing them because it’d only make them push everyone farther away from them.

There was nothing they could do for Luna at the moment, so they needed to focus on more immediate issues. With a deep sigh, Jade shifted their focus back onto the descent into the desert. They noticed they had fallen behind considerably, so they quickly jogged back up to the remainder of the group before any of them could ask questions.

While the camp was warm, it paled in comparison to the desert. As they approached the desert, they noticed that it was getting hot quickly. They could feel beads of sweat forming on their forehead and they weren't even there yet. They were likely going to need to express extreme caution if they wanted to survive.

"Hey, you three." The other three scouts stopped on command. "Just so we're on the same page, we're probably going to have to stay in the shade as much as possible. It's too hot to be out in the sun for long."

"Yeah… this sucks. Like, *really* sucks. It's too hot…" Jamie whined.

Neither Luna nor Riley said anything, but nodded in acknowledgment.

The group continued their descent in complete silence. The only sounds that occupied the air were the occasional tumbleweeds and tornadoes wandering aimlessly in the desert, as well as everyone's breathing and footsteps. Under any other circumstances, Jade would've been fine with it. However, the air felt too tense to revel in it.

The ground slowly transitioned from dirt to sand, marking the beginning of another adventure. They all grouped up at the bottom of the hill, unsure of where to go next. With all of the looming threats in mind, there was no clear path forward.

After some time, Jamie pointed towards a rock formation. "Hey! I see some shade under those rocks!" They paused to wipe sweat off of their forehead. "Might be easier to figure out where to go when we're not distracted by the heat." Jade, Luna and Riley all nodded in unison. Shade sounded really nice right about now.

Immediately after, a cheeky grin formed on Jamie's face. "Cool! Last one there's a rotten egg!" Before anyone could protest, they made a run for the shade. Jade didn't appreciate how reckless Jamie was. They could've easily been caught off-guard by a tumbleweed and they were more concerned about *racing*?

They weren't really in the mood to confront them at the moment, so they decided to tuck that concern away for another time. It'd probably come back to bite them in the future, but they instead decided to focus on more important issues.

Since everyone stopped to catch their breath, Jade decided that now was a good time to check out their surroundings. They were safe, even if only temporarily, and Jamie was going to need time to figure out a way forward so it felt appropriate.

Plenty of cacti dotted the landscape, some of them with thornberries sitting on top of them. A few of them had flowers blossoming, but the remainder were uninteresting. They were all thorny though, so it'd be incredibly unwise to make contact with them.

They weren't particularly fond of thornberries. They were sour and prickly, but they *were* edible. If they had room in either their or Luna's backpacks, they'd make an attempt to pick a couple of them and hold on to them. There were far better things they could eat, but if they were desperate…

The occasional tumbleweed rolled by the group, though they were quite large. This was their first time ever being in a desert, and consequently didn't know much about them, but… were tumbleweeds supposed to be that big? Those things were nearly *half* their height! A hit from one of those would definitely knock any of them off of their feet.

Suddenly, they caught something glistening out of the corner of their eye. Once they turned to get a better look, it turned out to be a white suitcase. It was strange how that got all the way out there, but maybe it would have some sunscreen in there. After all, they *were* going to Hawaii originally, so it made total sense.

They'd have to find the right time to make a run for it, though. They weren't particularly interested in being caught off guard by a tumbleweed—

Out of nowhere, Jamie decided to make a run for the suitcase. They didn't bother to look out for tumbleweeds, their vision completely tunneled on the suitcase. Jade couldn't stop them in time, so they helplessly watched as Jamie ran up to it. However, it randomly disappeared in front of all of them, making Jamie's stunt worthless. Jamie stood there, completely dumbfounded by this.

Before anyone could react, a tumbleweed quickly tumbled directly towards Jamie and hit them squarely in the chest, sending them rolling back in the direction they came from. Luna instinctively jumped out of the way, but Jade was there to stop Jamie from rolling. The tumbleweed itself was gone, so they could only assume it was redirected when it hit Jamie.

For a moment, Jamie laid motionless. That moment felt like *forever* to Jade. A lot of thoughts suddenly invaded their mind. *Are they hurt? Are they…* They shook their head before they could finish their last thought. Jamie was alive. They were breathing. They were… going to live, at the very least. Would they be hurting? For sure. But they were alive.

Jamie groaned before sitting up, revealing that their chest and stomach area were covered in thorns. They panicked almost immediately upon seeing them, but Luna grabbed them by their wrist before they could do anything.

"…L-Let me help you."

That was the first time Luna spoke since they lashed out at camp. Their stutter appeared to make its return, but their tone still felt cold. At least they were still willing to offer medical assistance, which Jade was extremely grateful for.

Jamie nodded in response, adjusting their position to make it easier for Luna remove the thorns.

Luna knelt down and gently grabbed the first thorn. After another nod from Jamie, they carefully pulled it out. Right after they pulled it out though, Jamie yelped in response and

pulled away from them.

Luna cringed at how Jamie reacted, but closed in on Jamie in an attempt to try again. “It’ll h-hurt more if they s-stay in there.” Jamie glared at them for a moment, but took a deep breath and once again nodded. They seemed to be muttering reassurances to themselves, but Jade couldn’t make out the words.

Luna managed to pull out the remaining thorns with few issues. They left behind several tiny holes, as evident by the tiny blotches of blood that stained Jamie’s tank top. They’d likely need to find another first-aid kit soon to patch those up before they could get infected.

Once they were finished, they took a step back to give Jamie back their personal space. They said nothing else but forced a small smile on their face.

Jamie gave Luna a thumbs-up. “Thanks, Luna.” Luna flatly hummed in response.

Jamie’s gaze immediately turned to Jade. “Jade, I—”

“Just stop being so reckless. Is that *too much* to ask?” They hastily added on the next part before Jamie could respond. “I let it slide when you decided to race everyone to get here, but… just *stop*.”

An unwanted sense of frustration washed over Jade. They had every right to feel this way, and yet, it felt *wrong*. They were never deliberately mean to Jamie before, but their patience was running thin by both this journey and Jamie constantly ignoring their pleads for caution. All they wanted was for them to not get hurt, and they just…

Jamie stared at Jade for a moment, then their face shifted towards guilt. “S-Sorry. I won’t do it again. I swear.”

They tried a more gentle approach. “I don’t want an apology, I just want you to be more careful.” They mulled over the next words that sat on their tongue for a moment. “I don’t want to lose you. Just… be more careful. *Please*.”

Jamie appeared to be pained by that last part. However, they simply nodded in response then got up. They let out a small grunt, presumably from the discomfort the tumbleweed left behind, but were otherwise not verbal about it. Once they stood up and brushed themselves off, they focused on moving forward.

Jade felt a tug at their right sleeve. They turned around to see that it was Luna, who pointed at the ground. Jade didn’t notice *what* they were pointing at at first, but they soon realized that they were slowly losing shade. They were going to need to make their next move soon.

“Got any ideas, Jamie? We’re running out of shade here.”

“Uh… I do see a bigger rock formation up ahead. Maybe we can go there?”

“Well, if nothing else, it’d buystutter us a little more time to figure out what to do next.”

“Okay. Let’s go then.”

The four of them ran to a much larger structure which had shade at all angles. This was much better than sitting under a tiny patch of shade. Barring any other hazards, this would give them plenty of time to figure out where to go.

Hiding almost out of sight was another suitcase. If it weren't for how reflective it was, Jade likely wouldn't have noticed it. They walked up to it, fully expecting it to disappear. However, it didn't. It just sat there, waiting to be opened. They opened it up, revealing a first-aid kit inside. *How convenient.*

Jamie caught sight of the first-aid kit and sighed in relief.

Jade offered the kit to Luna so they could help Jamie patch up their wounds. Without skipping a beat, Luna gently took the kit from them and opened it up, revealing plenty of Band-Aids and ointment inside.

Luna pointed towards one of the pillars of the structure and Jamie sat there without asking any questions. "S-Shirt off, please…"

Jamie's eyes widened in confusion, a blush sweeping across their face. "Seriously? You need me to take off my shirt???"

Irritation quickly replaced the concern on Luna's face. "D-Do you w-want me to help o-or not?"

"Ugh. *Fine*." Jamie hastily removed their tank top. "Make it quick."

Luna sat down in front of Jamie and pulled out a fistful of Band-Aids and the tube of ointment. Jade sat down beside them to observe the process. Luna first applied a drop of ointment to the pad of the Band-Aid and then covered up the wound, starting with the ones on their stomach.

As they got closer to Jamie's chest, they paused and waited for their approval. They nodded, prompting Luna to continue.

Once they were finished, they took a step back to make sure they covered everything up, then gave Jamie a thumbs-up. Jamie wasted no time in putting their tank top back on then quickly rose up. Again, a small grunt slipped out, but evidently they didn't want to waste time standing around.

Jade made a mental note to inquire on Jamie's condition later once they were in a safer place.

Luna put the remainder of the supplies back in the kit, then took off their backpack to stuff the kit into an open space. They then put their backpack on and nodded, suggesting that they were ready to continue.

There was a cactus with a red thornberry close by. That same cactus caught Jamie's attention and they pointed it out to Jade. "What's that on top of the cactus, Jade?"

"That's a thornberry. They grow naturally in deserts and despite their thorny appearance, they're actually edible. Sour, but edible." Jamie's face scrunched up when they heard "sour".

“Really? That prickly thing is edible?”

“Sure. It wouldn’t be the most comfortable thing to eat, but if you’re desperate enough… or… if you have the time, you could pull off all of the thorns *then* eat it.”

“Probably a good idea to grab it then, huh?”

“Well…” They caught a glimpse of the near-empty box of Thick Mints in Luna’s backpack. “Considering you two ate almost all of the cookies… that’d probably be a good idea.”

Riley stood up and volunteered to grab the thornberry. “I’ll get it.” They effortlessly plucked it from the top of the cactus and removed all of the thorns from it. They then offered it to Jade, who took it and put it in their backpack.

“I should clarify that there’s also golden thornberries. I’ve heard that they can heal your injuries a bit too, so… if you spot one and it’s not too far out of the way, feel free to grab it.” Everyone nodded in response.

Something off to the left appeared to catch Jamie’s attention. “Oh, check it out!” Everyone looked in the same direction and spotted an oasis. “Maybe we should—”

“No. We shouldn’t.” Everyone stared at Jade in confusion. “It’s just… so far out of the way. Is it really worth it?”

“Worth it for water? You tell me.”

Right. Water. They’d forgotten about that. They weren’t quite sure *how* they’ve made it this far without a lot of water… which only made Jamie’s desire to go there more understandable. They’d be lying if they said they weren’t thirsty themselves. “Right. I forgot about water. If we can get over there safely, we can check it out, okay?”

Jamie seemed content with that response and begun to trace out a route. However, they quickly became frustrated. “I’m gonna… look around for a bit. I won’t go far.” Their wary eyes met Jade’s. “And I won’t be so dumb this time.”

“Okay, but take someone with you when you go.”

“I’ll take Luna with me then.”

Luna stared at Jamie for a moment. “Okay. I’ll g-go with you.”

“Cool. Let’s go then.” Jamie walked around to the other side of the structure with Luna in tow. The two of them disappeared from Jade’s line of sight, leaving them alone with Riley.

With nothing else to do, Jade sat down and rested up against the same pillar that Jamie did earlier. Riley sat down beside them and absentmindedly dug in the sand.

They were starting to regret letting Jamie go without them, but they didn’t want to be too overbearing either. They’ve been through worse. They didn’t need, or want, to be pampered

all the time. They were getting older and wanted their independence. They needed to accept that.

Riley nudged Jade's shoe with their own. "You good?"

"I'm fine. Just have a lot on my mind right now."

"Hm. Okay."

After a few more minutes of silence, they heard a pair of footsteps rushing back towards them. Their first thought was that something went wrong and fully expected two panicked, potentially even injured, kids to re-appear. However, the exact opposite was the case. Neither of them were hurt. Jamie appeared to be excited about something though.

"Hey! I found that hole we spotted from the camp earlier!"

Riley tilted their head. "Oh?"

"Yeah! We didn't get to check it out for long because the sun kinda hurt, but… it seems cool!"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to check it out, right?" Riley looked over at Jade, who simply shrugged in response.

"Yesssss!!!! Let's go!" Jamie started to excitedly run in place. "This is gonna be awesome!"

Jamie led all of them back, and they did indeed find that same hole again. Jade stepped out into the sun to get a look. They could only see what the sun above illuminated, but it appeared to lead down into a dark tunnel. They couldn't see any farther than that.

Jade raised an eyebrow at Jamie. "Is it really a good idea to go down there?"

"Is it really a good idea to run between rocks and get hit by tornadoes and tumbleweeds?"

"Fair enough. Let's get going then. The sun's starting to sting."

Everyone began to climb down the hole one by one. Jamie went first, followed by Luna and Riley. Jade was the last to enter and plunge down into the unknown.

They didn't have a good feeling about this… Going down into total darkness and not knowing what was down there was not the most comforting thing. If nothing else, it *did* keep them away from the surface's threats, so they couldn't complain if that was the case.

Regardless of what was down there, they could only hope that it'd be worth taking the detour for.

# Chapter 18: Going Down Below

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After what felt like forever, they made it to the bottom of the tunnel. It was very dimly lit, but it was better than the near darkness that the tunnel had at some points. It was unlikely that they'd be able to make out finer details, but at least they could see farther than a couple feet again.

The air was noticeably cooler, and somehow more humid, than the surface. There was a bit of a draft from the hole above them, but the air was still otherwise. In spite of the humidity, it still felt much better than sitting out in the sun and sweating.

It actually reminded them of their—no, *their grandparents'* home. That wasn't Jade's home, or Jamie's home. Their grandparents made sure it couldn't feel like one to them.

Jade sighed and shook their head. They had far more important issues to worry about at the moment. They could sulk over how their life wasn't the best with their grandparents later.

Jamie unknowingly pulled Jade out of their rut when they called out from behind. Jade turned around and spotted another hole that everyone was standing around. They decided to walk up to it and see for themselves what was down there.

Once they approached the hole, they noticed that it was fairly lit inside, which made it easy to scope out the area. There was a mound of sand directly beneath the hole, and from the angle they were looking, they could see the bottom of… a pillar? They moved to another side of the hole and saw yet another pillar. *How odd…*

This was *very* interesting. These pillars were definitely man-made. Maybe they stumbled into some kind of tomb? Temple? Whatever it was, it was undoubtedly some kind of structure.

"Pretty cool, huh?"

"It… uh, definitely caught my attention, that's for sure."

"Things can be cool, you know. You don't have to be so boring all the time."

"I think we have different definitions of 'cool', Jamie…"

Riley butted in before they could argue any further. "So… are we going down or…?"

"Sure, but I call dibs on going first!"

Without another word, Jamie dropped down near the hole and allowed their legs to dangle for a moment. They then turned around and eased themselves into the hole, now hanging by only

their hands. They groaned, presumably from placing strain on their chest, then dropped into the hole.

And then…

Nothing?

“Is everything okay down there, Jamie?”

“I guess you’ll have to come down here and find out!”

Jade sighed, but they weren’t sure if that was a sigh of annoyance or relief. “Of course…”

“Huh?”

“Nothing, Jamie. I’m on my way down.”

Jade mimicked Jamie’s actions and dropped down onto a sand mound in the middle of the room. Somehow, they failed to notice it earlier, but it was convenient that it was there nonetheless.

They immediately spotted Jamie leaning up against a pillar. To the right of Jamie was an unlit torch, and a little more to the right was a hallway with a lot of those statues they saw at both camps lining it. At the end of that hallway was a lit torch, which would explain where the light came from.

They remembered that Luna and Riley still needed to come down as well, so they stepped off of the mound to give them space to do so.

They grabbed a nearby torch and shook it. Somehow, that actually worked and illuminated the entire room. The walls surrounding the mound were rather uninteresting, but what *did* interest them was that one of the pillars had collapsed right beside it. Had they fallen a little more to the right, they probably would’ve been in quite a bit of pain.

Both the fallen pillar and the standing pillars had some engravings on them. They were interested in getting a better look at them, so they approached one of the standing pillars to investigate. Near the bottom, a hand was depicted on one side and a skull on the other. Above that was a depiction of what appeared to be a scout with their arms spread and their eyes closed. On the other side was a skeleton in that exact same pose.

At some point, Jamie had joined Jade in observing the pillar. They only knew once Jamie hummed in confusion. “What does this mean…?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t know if I like that it’s alluding to death.”

“Is that what it is? I thought it just looked kinda…”

“Cool?”

“Nah, creepy.”

“Oh sh—” That sounded like Riley? Before they could confirm though, they heard a thud followed by an “oof” from behind. When they turned around, they saw Riley rolling towards them. They stopped just in front of them and Jamie.

“Oh hey, Riley.”

“…hi, Jamie.”

Jade offered a hand to pull Riley up. Riley stared at their hand for a moment before accepting. Once they got up, they brushed themselves off and looked a bit embarrassed after all of that. Jade had greater concerns though.

“You feeling okay?”

“Yeah. Just missed the landing, that’s all.”

“Okay.”

Jamie’s eyes darted around the room before landing on Riley. “So… where’s Luna?”

“Uh…” Riley looked back at the mound, but Luna wasn’t there. “They were supposed to follow me…”

“You… didn’t let them go before you???”

“They said—”

Jamie sighed. “Let’s just get them down here so we can go deeper.”

Riley nodded then returned to the mound and extended their arms upward. Luna’s legs then dropped into view, and once they were reassured that Riley would grab them, the remainder of them came into view. Riley grabbed them and eased them down onto the mound gently then let go of them.

Luna stepped up to the same pillar that Jade and Jamie investigated earlier. Once their eyes landed on the skull then the skeleton, they shivered and took a step back. They gave Jade a look that looked a lot like genuine fear.

“I… I d-don’t like this place…”

“Jeez, you’re such a scaredy-cat…” Jamie sighed and offered a hand to Luna. “Would it make you feel better if you stuck with me?”

Luna stared at Jamie’s hand for a moment, then backed off. “I don’t w-wanna be a… n-noo.. nuis…”

Jamie finished what they were trying to say. “Nuisance?” Luna confirmed with a nod. “Where’s this coming from?”

“W-When I… n-needed help… Edm—uh, S-Scoutmaster Edmond…” Luna trailed off, but Jade knew very well where they were going. *They were considered a nuisance.*… It seemed that Jamie knew too, since they frowned immediately.

“Okay, well, news flash buddy! I’m not him, so… you coming with me or not?”

Luna once again took a step forward towards Jamie, who still had their hand out. They stared at it, before finally grabbing onto it. They shuffled a little closer to Jamie than usual, but Jade figured it was just due to anxiety. After all, they had every right to be nervous. This wasn’t exactly the most inviting or comforting place to be in.

“Cool. Glad that’s settled. Can we go now?”

Jade nodded. “Sure. I’ll take lead since I have the torch. Everyone okay with that?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Jamie looked over at Luna and smirked. “Need to make sure this crybaby doesn’t run off or get lost anyways.”

“And I’ll stay in the back.” Riley fell in line behind Jamie and Luna to prove their point.

“Very well. Let’s go.”

“Actually,” Jade paused. “Can we check these statues out?” Jamie inquired. They walked up to the nearest one and pointed at it.

Riley interjected before Jade could answer. “Before you answer, Jade… I don’t think these are worth our time.”

Jamie’s brows furrowed. “Why not?”

“Well, for starters, none of these statues emit a dull hum.” Jamie raised an eyebrow. “The statue I interacted with after being cursed hummed until I interacted with it. After it gave me that anti-gravity rope, it stopped.”

Riley sighed then continued. “Second of all, there’s six statues perfectly lined up in the middle of some underground… whatever this is. You don’t think it could be a trap if they *did* do something?”

Jamie stared at the statues for a moment then shrugged their shoulders. “Okay, I’ll… leave them alone then.”

Jade entered the hallway and noticed a slope leading down to yet another opening. It seemed unassuming, but it also appeared to be their only way forward, so they had no choice but to continue that way.

They began their descent towards the opening. As they walked by the statues, they couldn’t help but brew up a ton of questions about them. How did they get there? Were they like the other statues? Were they rigged to trigger a trap? Why were there six specifically?

They all walked in silence until they reached the opening. They stopped just in front of it and held their torch out just a little farther so they could see what was inside. All they could see though was… a hallway. No pillars, no statues, nothing. Just… a hallway. A *narrow* hallway, at that.

They weren't claustrophobic themselves but… it could become an issue very quickly as well. They could only hope the others weren't either, because panic and disorder were the last things they needed in a tight place.

Their eyes scanned what little they could see for any signs of traps, but they couldn't spot any. It was entirely possible that they were well-hidden though. With this in mind, they cautiously continued forward, their eyes constantly scanning what they could see along the way.

However, they quickly came across their first problem, a fork in the path. Or, well, *would be* first problem if it weren't for the fact that the path leading forward was completely obstructed by debris. The path to their left was unobstructed, so they went that way.

Jade shrugged. "Well, that was easy, I guess."

The light from behind them began to fade as they took several turns down the path, leaving them with only their torch to light the way.

A new concern arose as a result: the torch likely had a finite amount of time before it extinguished. Fortunately, there were several torches dotted along the walls, but the possibility of being plunged into complete darkness in a maze frightened them nonetheless.

They once again came across a fork. This time though, both paths appeared to be open and branched off to the left and right.

"Well," Jamie sighed. "Guess we don't gotta worry about who's going with who, at least. Luna is basically inseparable from me right now, so…"

"I suppose that leaves me with Riley then. But… who goes which direction? And how will we meet up again?"

"Let's go right. And…" Riley hummed in thought. "If we either find something or a dead-end, go back and tell the others? Or… worst case scenario, yell and hope that they hear?"

"Maybe just walking back would be better but… that plan sounds about as good as it can be."

Jamie grabbed a nearby torch and shook it, providing them with another source of light. "Well, I guess we should go then. We're wasting time just standing here." Jade nodded in response. "See you two soon!" They then dragged along Luna and disappeared around a corner.

Jade wordlessly led Riley down the right path. The two of them walked in complete silence for a while, but something started to gnaw at Jade.

The absence of Jamie and Luna was starting to get to them. While they weren't necessarily interested in pampering the two of them, they weren't exactly interested in not having any idea on where or how they were either. Furthermore, simply not being in their presence made them feel uneasy.

*They could be hurt. They could be missing. They could be lost. They could be stuck. They could be d—*

They were shaken by Riley, who was now standing in front of them. They weren't sure how, or when, that happened. They simply responded with a confused look on their face.

"Check this out." Riley moved just enough to reveal a massive chamber in front of them.

The first thing that Jade noticed immediately was the seemingly bottomless pit. Their anxiety spiked at the sight. They could handle a steep drop knowing how far down it was, but this? This was genuinely terrifying for them. This would most certainly lead to someone's death if they fell.

It was nearly enough for them to have second thoughts about all of this.

At the very least, it *was* illuminated, so they could at least see where they were going. It didn't ease their tensions at all, though.

The chamber was rather long, and it seemed like the only way forward would be by the ledges jutting out from the walls. Their only way to each one would be to scale the walls, which would seriously test everyone's endurance. With nothing to catch them if they fell, they'd really need to be cautious.

In each corner of the chamber they saw the same pillars they saw at the beginning. They all had the same engravings as before, so they had no interest in continuing to focus on them at the moment.

To be completely honest, they were *scared*. They hadn't felt like that in a long time but… this chamber was very dangerous and intimidating. They weren't really concerned for their own safety, but if Jamie or Luna fell down there…

Riley put a hand on Jade's right shoulder and crouched down to their eye level. They seemed to be a bit nervous themselves, but they were trying their best to be sympathetic too.

"You're nervous."

"Honestly, I'm *scared* Riley. I don't want those two getting hurt or… you know."

Riley winced at the possibility. "…Yeah. We can turn back if you don't want to do this."

"We can?"

"Jamie has that anti-gravity rope, we can probably make something work."

Jade mulled on that possibility for a bit. They knew that Luna would almost certainly agree to this considering they didn't want to be down there to begin with. Jamie, on the other hand, would likely put up more of a fight. They seemed to be stoked about exploring it, so it's unlikely that they'd be happy to leave. It seemed that both them and Riley ultimately went with the flow rather than having their own reservations, so…

"Maybe we should wait until we can talk to them about it. I… have my reservations about this, but I'd be willing to go with whatever happens."

"Agreed. Should we backtrack and find them?"

"Sounds like a good—"

They were cut off by two sets of footsteps behind them. They turned around to find Jamie and Luna, hand in hand, right behind them.

Jamie waved. "Hey. We found a dead-end, so we decided to come the way you two went."

Jade waved in response. "Hi, you two. Riley and I were actually about to come find you two. Come check out what we've found."

They leaned up against the wall to create an opening for Jamie and Luna to check out the chamber. As expected, Jamie seemed stoked about it while Luna seemed to be deathly afraid. Though, Jamie *did* appear to be slightly tense too, but they couldn't pinpoint exactly *why*. It was possible that the bottomless pit spooked them.

Jamie's eyes scanned the walls, potentially in an attempt to path out a route. Jade assumed they'd be doing that for some time, so they decided to give Luna some attention in the meantime.

Luna had already stepped back from the opening. They didn't need a thorough analysis to decide that they weren't excited about this. Their body language only confirmed as much. They were fidgeting with their hands in the absence of Jamie's, which was probably the only thing keeping them anchored.

Even though it likely wouldn't change anything, Jade still felt the need to reassure them, comfort them, *something* to calm them down a bit.

They spotted the Bing Bong plushie poking out of Luna's backpack and figured that'd be a good starting point.

They managed to pull it out without alerting them and then placed it in their hands. Their eyes darted between the plushie now in their hands and Jade several times. It was abundantly clear that they were confused by the gesture.

Regardless, they eventually looked back down at the plushie and smiled softly. They gave it a gentle squeeze and then held it up to their heart. They smiled at Jade then stepped back up to the opening. They were probably still not keen on climbing, but they seemed to be a bit more at ease with the situation now.

Jamie took a step back from the opening and turned around. Luna mimicked their motions. “Okay, so uh, do you all want the good news or bad news first?”

“Bad news.”

“Bad news is, there’s not really a ‘safe’ way across. That was probably obvious, but, uh… yeah.”

“And the good news?”

“The good news is, there *is* a way across.” They pointed to their right, but Jade couldn’t see what it was. “If we start over here, we can scale the wall to each of these ledges. For some, we might have to go one at a time, especially since some of us have backpacks.” Their finger started to trace what Jade assumed was the wall. “We just keep following along the wall until…” Their finger landed on the opening on the other side of the pit. “We get to the other side. Sounds simple, but… we’ll see how it goes.”

Riley put up a hand before anyone could move. “Wait.” Jamie tilted their head. “You still got that rope Jamie?”

“Uh… yeah…? How is that gonna help us…?”

“You reckon we could use it to go back?”

“Go… back…? Do you hear yourself?”

“You actually want not just you, but *everyone else*, to take their chances on this?”

Jamie stared at Riley blankly then sighed. “You could’ve just said ‘no’ when I asked to come down here, you know.”

“I didn’t know it’d have all of *this*.”

“So let me get this straight. Your curiosity told you to come down here and check it out, but only *now* since there’s a challenge to overcome, you want to back out?”

“And you’re willing to endanger everyone in the pursuit of sating your curiosity?”

It was becoming clear that this was going to devolve into an argument. Jade wasn’t sure when to intervene though.

“Everyone made the choice to follow me. I didn’t make *anyone* do *anything*.” Jamie growled.

“P-Please stop…” Unfortunately, Luna’s plea only fell on deaf ears.

Well, except for Jade’s. Jade heard them, and they were going to make sure everyone else did too.

They forced themselves between Jamie and Riley, bringing the argument to an abrupt halt. *Someone* needed to mediate this.

“We don’t have time for this. Riley, I understand that you want a way out, but realistically, there’s no way back up. Even if we *did* have enough rope, we need to account for the fact that there’s a lot of twists and turns and jagged edges going back up. Either way we’re taking a huge risk.”

Riley sighed. “I just… I don’t know how I feel about this now.”

“I know. But, we don’t exactly have a lot of options anymore. I’m afraid our last chance to turn back was before we jumped down from the tunnel above.”

“I guess so.”

Jamie’s eyes warily darted between Jade and Riley. They knew they were next. “Uh… what about me?”

“Just be extremely cautious. While we don’t exactly have a way out at the moment, let’s not throw ourselves in the pit either. If you have even the slightest concern about it, don’t do it. This isn’t just some mountain or giant mushroom. It’s life or death, Jamie.”

“…Right. I’ll try my best. Can’t promise anything though.”

“Are we done arguing then? We need to focus on moving forward.” They looked over their shoulder at Luna, who had eased up since the arguing ceased. “And, uh, you two were spooking Luna. We really don’t need any of this, especially not *here*.”

Jamie and Riley looked at each other and nodded. Jade let out a sigh of relief. That definitely could’ve gone worse.

“Thank you. Now… can we get moving?”

Jamie turned their back on Jade to observe the chamber again. “Yeah. Sure. Just… listen to me while we’re doing this, please?”

“Of course.”

The first spot that Jamie climbed over to—the spot that Jade failed to spot earlier—was both large and flat. It’d serve well as a starting point.

Jade mimicked Jamie’s motions and landed with no issues. They let out a breath they weren’t aware they were holding. Luna followed after them while Riley stood near the opening and watched. After Luna similarly landed with no issues, Riley made the climb over. Part of the wall broke off when they grabbed it, but were able to quickly recover. They then landed themselves, but it wasn’t the most graceful landing.

“Hey, maybe once this is all said and done, I’ll be strong enough to climb anything,” Riley jested between ragged breaths.

Jamie scoffed in response. “Yeah, maybe. Bet you won’t ever be as strong as me though!” They dramatically flexed their muscles.

Well, it seemed like those two were able to drop their differences quickly. In fact, they seemed to be more lively around each other than before. Jade found the turnaround a bit odd, but chose to dismiss that concern for now. They had a far more important issue in front of them they needed to focus on.

The next ledge, as Jamie warned it might be, was quite small in comparison. Even someone Jamie's size didn't have a lot of space, so they were definitely going to have to go one at a time. Fortunately, the ledge following that one had some more space so a few of them could stop for a moment and rest.

Luna silently chose to go first. Once they made it to the smaller ledge, they made the mistake of pausing and looking down. It only took a quick glance for them to look back up and freeze in fear. They then stared at Jamie, as if they needed some reassurance before they continued.

Jamie groaned and crept closer to the edge and spread out their arms. It felt like a silent promise to catch Luna if they fell, which seemed to be sufficient for them since they continued to climb afterwards. They made it to Jamie with no issues, leaving it up to Jade and Riley to make the climb across.

Before either of them could do that though, Jamie put out a hand. "Hold up. I dunno if both of you can also stand here. There's another bigger ledge up ahead though, so Luna and I will meet you there."

Luna whined shortly after and the reason quickly became apparent. They were getting tired of carrying the backpack. Constantly fidgeting with the straps and the little groans when they adjusted it suggested it was taking its toll on them. Jamie was quick to catch on to this and snatched their backpack without asking.

"Better?" Luna only nodded in response. "Cool. Let's go."

With Luna situated and them and Jamie continuing onward, it was time for Jade and Riley to move too. They were able to make the climb to the next two ledges with few issues. After walking over the peak of the second ledge, it was clear that from here on out, it was going to be much easier. All of the remaining ledges were larger, so as long as everyone could endure scaling the wall, they'd be fine.

For a while, things were going well, but it was becoming abundantly clear that Riley was struggling. Jade had picked up on it after they were drawing ragged breaths from the first climb. They'd only made it halfway through before leaning against the wall with heavier breaths.

Jade approached Riley, concern painted on their face. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah… just… still not… good at this… I guess."

"If it makes you feel any better, Jamie was the same for a while. Unfit, couldn't really climb a hill if you wanted them to. They weren't *unhealthy*, but clearly not built for that stuff at the time."

“Really…? They weren’t just… born like that…?”

“Nope. I know, what a surprise, right?” Jade chuckled. “But, uh, no. It took a lot of practice. It’ll likely take you a lot too. But… honestly? I think you’re already getting a lot of it from all of this.”

“Yeah…” They paused and looked over at Jamie and Luna. The latter was patiently waiting; the former less so. “Alright… let’s keep going.”

Fortunately, the remainder of the climb concluded without any further issues. It seemed that the small break and pep talk was all that Riley needed to muster the energy to make it the rest of the way.

Once Jade stepped into the entrance of the new hallway, they were very grateful to be back on stable ground. They took a moment to sit and breathe. It seemed that Riley had the same idea, but Jamie and Luna went a bit farther ahead. This time, Jamie made sure they stayed in Jade’s line of sight.

However, they didn’t have much time to revel in it though, since Jamie gasped in awe at something ahead. Luna appeared to be very interested in what was ahead too, so it had to have been good.

Jade and Riley rose up to get a look and… well, the two younger kids had a good reason to be intrigued.

There was what appeared to be some kind of golden statue sitting in the middle of a massive room. It was set upon a pedestal and raised up above the floor. Surrounding it was a large platform with pillars in each corner. Beyond that was a seemingly dark and endless void, much like the one in the chamber they just crossed.

The statue looked a lot like the Bing Bong plushie that Luna carried. Luna seemed to notice this as well, since they looked back and forth between the statue and their plushie several times before making the connection.

In the background was a giant statue, identical to the ones they saw at each camp and in that structure. They almost expected Jamie to jokingly ask if there would be a giant item inside of it, but their attention was honed in on the statue.

It seemed innocuous… but it felt *wrong*. It just felt too good to be true. There’s no way there would just be treasure sitting out in the open for the taking. There *had* to be a catch.

Jamie didn’t seem to have the same concern because they decided to run down the ramp and towards the statue. They paused just inches from it and observed it for a moment. Without any warning, they yanked it off of the pedestal.

There was a “click” noise that came from a pressure plate hidden on the pedestal. Everyone simply stared at it in silence until everything started to rumble.

*That* was the catch.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact #4? I lost count: I got extremely carried away writing this chapter. I was just having a lot of fun and also didn't really know a good stopping point, so there's a staggering 4,575 words in this chapter. I tried to be less ambitious in future chapters so I do believe this is the longest in the fic.

# Chapter 19: Back on Stable Ground

The “click” from the pressure plate on the pedestal was definitely the activation of a trap. The rumbling coupled with the debris now falling from the ceiling confirmed as much. They could’ve sworn they also felt the ground beneath them shaking, as if it wanted to cave in and drop them into the void below.

They needed to *go*, but where to? All they knew was that backtracking to the start wasn’t an option. Even if they *did* make it through the chamber and maze, they’d still have to contend with the climb back up to the surface. Not to mention that the falling debris would either crush them or block them in before they even made it that far.

They had to find another way. *They had to.*

Jamie was frantically scurrying around on the platform, presumably faced with the same predicament as Jade. They seemed to have a mix of guilt and panic on their face. Their eyes were darting all over the place, but froze when they landed on something.

Jamie waved to the group with both arms. “Over here, you three!” They shouted over the rumbling.

The three of them ran over to Jamie as quickly as they could. They soon spotted the same thing that Jamie spotted. It was a ramp going… down? How was that going to help any of them? Weren’t they trying to go *up*?

Jamie seemed to have spotted Jade’s confusion. “Got any better ideas?” Their eyes were frantic, their fidgeting erratic. They were clearly not in the mood to linger or argue.

Out of nowhere, a giant boulder crashed down and blocked off the hallway they came from earlier.

Jade sighed. “Not anymore I don’t.”

“Cool, let’s get the hell out of here then!” Jamie ran down without waiting for a response. Jade followed quickly behind them. They could only pray that Luna and Riley were doing the same.

They spotted yet another hallway at the bottom of the ramp. While they were getting tired of running around in a confined space, they didn’t exactly have a choice in the matter, so they continued full speed ahead into it.

They took only one turn before they noticed a ramp going up. It didn’t appear to be terribly steep, as evident by Jamie running up it, so they decided to run up it themselves.

Jamie had paused at the top. They were doubled over and heaving. Was something wrong?

Jade caught up to them. They were a little short of breath themselves. “Hey… is something wrong…?”

The statue that Jamie had been holding onto was now on the ground. “Statue’s… heavy…”

Jade suddenly remembered they had a backpack and tossed it on the ground beside the statue. They then made a spot in it and stuffed the statue in there. When they put it back on their back, they noticed the increase in weight immediately. *They weren’t kidding… I can handle this though.*

Jamie stretched for a moment. “Thanks Jade… appreciate it.” They then continued up the next ramp without waiting for a response. However, they were considerably slower than before. Jade chalked it up to their fatigue, but kept an eye on them nonetheless.

Speaking of the next ramp, they noticed some light peeking out near the top of it. Whether it was a torch or natural light, they couldn’t tell, but it was a good sign nonetheless.

Once they reached the top of that ramp, they were able to confirm that it was *natural* light. However, they also spotted what appeared to be massive stairs leading up to that light. They weren’t particularly excited to make that climb since they were tired and carrying a heavy load, but anything beat being crushed by falling rocks.

With a deep sigh, Jade approached the first step and grabbed onto it. Surprisingly, while the ascent was rather steep, the stairs themselves weren’t terribly high. Even with as short as they were, they were able to grab the top of each stair and pull themselves up. The extra weight did make it a little more difficult, but they managed to reach the top with few issues.

The others were already waiting at the top. They expected Jamie to berate them for going slow, but they didn’t say anything. They instead just nodded. They also seemed to be doing a little better, which was reassuring.

“They couldn’t at least give us an easier time with climbing up?” Riley whined.

Jamie rolled their eyes. “*Really*? I thought escaping was the easiest part. All we had to do was a bit of running and climbing!”

Riley hummed. “Fair enough. Let’s get going.”

The group approached the exit, though they couldn’t quite figure out who would go first.

Jamie huffed and pushed ahead towards the exit. They hissed once they stepped outside. They retreated back into the shade for a moment before rubbing their eyes and stepping back out.

Jade followed Jamie outside and immediately found out why they were bothered. The sudden change in light overwhelmed their vision and made them feel dizzy. They stumbled back into the shade until their eyes could re-adjust. The dizziness dissipated shortly after.

Jamie groaned and rubbed their forehead. “I really didn’t miss being out here…”

Luna and Riley stepped out and had similar complaints. However, nobody would have a chance to go back inside since the exit collapsed after those two left.

“I suppose there’s no going back now.” Riley sighed.

Jamie shrugged. “I guess not. I’ll start looking for a way forward.”

Suddenly, Jade noticed something green out of the corner of their eye. They almost dismissed it as another cactus, but it was far too vibrant to be that. They did a double take to confirm and instead of a cactus, they spotted several palm trees.

They soon made the connection that it was that same oasis that they’d seen before. It was very convenient that they ended up exiting the tomb close to it.

“Hey Jamie, remember that oasis you found earlier?”

“Yeah? What about it?” Jamie was still scoping out a way forward.

“Well, check it out.” Jade pointed over in the direction of the oasis. Jamie’s eyes lit up once they spotted it. “Since we’re close, maybe we should take a detour to see what it has.”

“Nice! What are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Jamie bolted towards it, but were stopped dead in their tracks when Jade firmly placed a hand on their shoulder. “R-Right… no more being reckless and dumb… sorry.”

“No… it’s not that.” Jade could hear some sand swirling around, though it was very faint. “Do you hear that?”

“Uh… no. I don’t—”

A tornado suddenly materialized in front of them. Fortunately, it ended up going a different direction, but had Jade not stopped Jamie…

No. It wasn’t worth thinking about what didn’t happen.

“Oh. Uh. Okay.”

Jade finally let go of Jamie. “Can you at least go slow enough for us to stay together? I don’t want us to get split up.”

Jamie nodded. “Yeah. I can do that.”

“Okay. Go ahead whenever you’re ready then.”

Without another word, Jade followed behind Jamie as they set off towards the oasis once more. Luna and Riley followed not too far behind them.

Fortunately the oasis wasn’t too far away so after a few minutes of chasing any shade they could, they made it to their destination. They were very pleased to note that it wasn’t a mirage, otherwise their efforts would’ve been for naught.

The first thing they noticed was a small pond with two capybaras sitting inside of it. One of them had a yellow winterberry—*wait, a winterberry, here?*—and the other had a cowboy hat. They both seemed quite relaxed and didn't have any visible reaction to their four new friends.

There were three palm trees surrounding the oasis. They carried five coconuts in total. This meant that everyone would have something to eat and drink and have one to spare for later. They did still have some shroomberries, mushrooms, a thornberry and a couple Thick Mints, but diversifying their selection of food was still welcomed.

Something they didn't notice earlier was that there were also bushes near the base of each tree. The bushes themselves didn't contain any crispberries, but it was still interesting to note. Greenery wasn't exactly common in a place like that.

They noted that Jamie slipped out of their shoes. They assumed Jamie just wanted to relax and dip their feet in the water, so they paid no mind to it. What they didn't expect was for Jamie to just… jump into the water?

Everyone, except for the capybaras, managed to avoid the water that Jamie splashed up. The capybaras seemed to have no issue with it though.

Jamie sighed in contentment once they re-emerged from beneath the water. "This is amazing… never thought I'd like cold water."

Jade couldn't help but chuckle. "Never thought you'd like getting a rash either."

"What do you mean?"

"You're gonna be walking around with wet clothes *and* sweating while climbing. You will most definitely end up with a rash somewhere after all of this."

"Do you always have to be such a killjoy, Jade?"

"I'm just looking out for you."

"Whatever."

Jade gave up on arguing with Jamie and opted to sit down near the edge of the pond. They kicked off their sandals haphazardly and tossed their backpack off to their right.

After a moment of hesitance, they allowed their feet to rest in the water. It was cold, just as Jamie stated, but not uncomfortably so. In fact, it felt extremely comforting after everything they had endured in the past few days. They could sit there all day and just soak it all in, and honestly? That didn't sound like a terrible idea.

As much as they wanted to do that though, they had to snap themselves back to reality. Even in the comforts of the oasis, they weren't safe, nor were they making progress that way. They didn't want to move so soon, but they couldn't linger for long either.

Jamie swiped the yellow winterberry from the capybara's head and inspected it curiously. They then held it out to Jade with a confused look on their face. "Hey Jade, what's this?

Looks like… some kind of berry?”

“Correct. That’s a winterberry. I don’t really know how that capybara got one of those though, since they usually only grow in colder climates.”

“Maybe it was somewhere cold before it came here?”

Jade hummed. “Maybe.”

“And the taste?”

“Sour.” Jade laughed when Jamie’s face scrunched up. “Just kidding. It’s sweet and savory. You’d enjoy those a lot more than the thornberries.”

“So… should we save it for later? Sounds like it’s kinda rare to come across.”

“I’d say so. It’s one of our sweeter treats… like the… full box of Thick Mints that magically disappeared?”

Jamie rolled their eyes in response. They then tossed the berry to Jade, who nearly dropped it in the sand. Jamie laughed at the act, but stopped when Jade glared at them.

Jade reached for their backpack to search for a spot to stuff the berry into it. However, they struggled to find an open spot. They had accumulated a lot of things on their travels but ran out of space to carry any more. So instead, they simply stared at the berry. They didn’t want to eat it now, but they didn’t want to throw it away either. That was quite the conundrum to be in.

Suddenly, two coconuts rolled up to them on their left. They failed to notice until one of them gently collided with their thigh. They looked around in an attempt to identify who, or where, they came from. They did notice that Riley and Luna were now sitting beside them with their own coconuts. It was likely that one of them did that.

Luna waved, but their attention immediately shifted to the berry in Jade’s hands. “Uh, I c-can hold that for you, Jade!”

“Oh, thank you Luna. I appreciate that.” Jade began to get up, but Riley held out a hand before they could. Jade put the berry in Riley’s hand and watched as it was passed to Luna. Luna then quickly stuffed it in their backpack and put it behind them.

“Thank you for the coconuts, Riley.”

“Sure. I wasn’t sure if Jamie wanted to come out of the water for theirs yet so… I’ll leave it up to you to give it to them.”

“Jamie—” Jamie had already emerged from the water. “Oh! Here. Riley got a coconut for you.”

They grabbed one of the coconuts from beside Jade and sat to Jade’s right. They tore into the coconut, paying no further mind to anyone around them.

Now that Jamie was taken care of, Jade focused on their own coconut. They cracked it and turned it horizontally to ensure they wouldn't lose the water. Once the halves were separated, they held the half with water in their hands and set the other half on their lap.

They remembered just how thirsty they had gotten, so they quickly gulped down the water with zero hesitation. They then scooped out the meat with their bare hands and stuffed it in their mouth. It wasn't exactly the most sanitary thing they've done, but cleanliness wasn't easy to accomplish given their situation.

They repeated the same procedure with the other half, then dropped both halves in the same spot they grabbed the coconut from.

Jamie laid down with a loud "thud" once they were finished with their own coconut. Jade decided to do the same.

"You're gonna get a lot of wet sand stuck to you, you know that right?"

"Meh. That's a problem for future Jamie."

"Feeling any better after all of that?"

"After all of what?"

"Well… that tomb we were in and after being hit by that tumbleweed."

"Oh. Still kinda worn out from that place and carrying that statue." Jamie groaned as they re-adjusted their position. "But… I'm feeling better after being hit by that tumbleweed. My chest just feels a bit sore now."

"Okay. That's good."

"Yeah. I'll admit, Luna did good in taking care of that for me, even if I was a baby about it."

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence after that. Jade stared up at the sky. Unsurprisingly, there was nothing to see up there, aside from the sun.

Though the sand was grainy, they still felt comfortable. Under any other circumstances, they could probably take a nap there. However, they weren't really able to in the moment.

While they *were* worn out because of all of that climbing and running back in the tomb, they were still very aware, and anxious, of the dangers of the desert. They couldn't fully be at ease even if they wanted to be.

In spite of all of that though, they *really* didn't want to get up. It wasn't until they laid down that the aches and pains really settled in. They'd probably sleep very hard after everything was said and done at the next camp.

They weren't going to be able to enjoy that moment for long though.

“Once you two finish your coconuts, we’re leaving. I think we’ll be safer in the caverns up ahead,” Jamie declared.

“Sounds good to me,” Riley said between swallowing bites. “Hey Luna, you got room for an extra coconut?”

“Mhm! J-Just, uh… c-can I…”

“You can finish your coconut. Just wanted to make sure.”

Jamie nudged Jade’s right arm. “Hey. I know you wanna lay around all day. Hell, I do too! We can’t stay here though,” they said in a lower volume.

“I know. I’ll… get up when those two are done.”

Jamie sighed. “Whatever works for you, I guess.”

A few minutes passed by. The only sounds were the occasional chewing and swallowing of coconut meat as well as ever-so faint breeze. The sounds of the desert beyond the oasis seemed to fade into the background.

They heard a gentle thud followed by another shortly after. That was likely the sound of both Luna’s and Riley’s coconuts being tossed into the sand, so Jade took that as their cue to sit up. For Jamie, that appeared to be their cue to stand.

Jade didn’t really want to get up, but now that Luna had slipped on their backpack and Jamie slipped on their shoes, that meant that everyone was waiting on them now.

They pulled their feet out of the water and stood up. They stretched with a groan, then shook off whatever sand they could from their feet and put their sandals back on. They then grabbed their backpack and slung one of the straps over their right shoulder.

“I’m guessing we’re all ready then?” Jamie asked. Everyone nodded in response. “Cool. Let’s get moving towards the caverns up ahead then.”

Jamie moved past everyone and forward towards the caverns. For a moment, Luna did nothing, but then they waved at the capybaras and then followed Jamie. Riley stood there and motioned for Jade to move ahead. Once Jade passed them, they fell into line in the back.

Their luck with dodging tornadoes would continue. Any that did appear were far away, and before any could get close, they dissipated. The tumbleweeds were still just as scary, but with everyone on higher alert for those, they were easily avoidable.

Fortunately, there were several rock structures dotting the landscape to provide them shade along their path. When the sun got too unbearable, they’d all duck into shade temporarily before stepping back into the sun.

They soon came across yet another obstacle. Their heart sank once they noticed what it was. It wasn’t something they were really looking forward to, nor was it something they really wanted to see.

A canyon.

# Chapter 20: Crossing the Canyon

The four of them stood over the edge of a canyon that cut deep into the ground. It had ledges of varying shapes and sizes jutting out of both sides. It seemed like a nice change of pace from the tomb with the added benefit of protecting them from the sun.

A small detail that they noticed was that there were small cacti balls spread intermittently across both walls of the canyon. While they were far and few between, they was still worth keeping an eye out for. They doubted anyone would want to have to deal with thorns stuck to them, especially after what happened to Jamie with the tumbleweed.

Jade couldn't actually see it from their angle, but they presumed there was visible ground at the bottom of the canyon. The depth of it was yet to be known, but it was better than staring, or falling, into an endless void.

Looking past the canyon, they could see more clearly the cave system sprawling out and up to the top of the mountain. It had the advantage of being mostly shaded, so they could start to take things a little easier if—no, *when* they got there.

But… they needed to focus on the canyon for now. Their mind was thinking too far ahead… and far too pessimistically, too.

"Well, what are we standing around for?" Jamie jumped down to the ledge just a few inches below them. "Let's go!" They then turned around, but rather than seeming pleased, they seemed… confused? Concerned? Whatever it was, they were looking just past Jade.

Jade looked behind them to figure out what Jamie was looking at. They spotted Luna staring blankly down into the canyon. Had they zoned out? Maybe something was on their mind? Either way, they needed to be snapped out of their daze so everyone could begin the descent.

Jamie climbed back up from the ledge and gave Luna a shake. It wasn't too rough, but just enough to get their attention.

Luna blinked rapidly and looked around. Once they realized that everyone's eyes were on them, they blushed in embarrassment. "S-Sorry… w-we can go."

Jamie rolled their eyes. "Do you even know what we're doing?"

"Uh, i-it's a canyon. I-It can't be t-that hard, right…?"

Jade chuckled. "You've really been rubbing off on them, haven't you Jamie?"

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, the sarcastic comments? Stuff like that?"

"They're just learning from the best!"

"*Riiiiight.*"

Jamie cleared their throat. "*Anyways!* We've got some more stuff to climb, so let's go already!" They then dropped back down to the ledge they were once on.

Luna giggled at the siblings' antics then followed Jamie down. Maybe Jamie rubbing off on them wasn't such a bad thing after all.

The ledge appeared to be too small to hold anyone else, so both Jade and Riley stayed behind. They only jumped down once both Jamie and Luna safely jumped down to another one just a few inches lower.

This trend of short descents continued until suddenly…

The four of them reached a wider ledge overlooking a massive drop. They could very clearly see the bottom of the canyon from there, and that only put into perspective just how deep it went. If one of them fell, they were unlikely to survive. Even if they didn't suffer physical trauma from hitting every ledge on their way down, they'd still hit the ground too hard.

"Huh. We can actually see the bottom here." Jamie rubbed their chin. "Gimme a sec to figure this out. But, uh, feel free to look around too."

Luna made no effort to search. In fact, they only got a little closer to Jamie. Jamie didn't seem to mind though. Riley, on the other hand, started scouting off to the right. Jade took that as their cue to do some scouting to the left. It was unlikely to yield any results, but it was better than staring down hopelessly towards the bottom.

It felt strange to be alone again. For the past few days, they've been constantly surrounded by people, both familiar and unfamiliar. They had wandered off to forage for food back in the forest, but even then, they were being monitored by Riley the entire time. This time, they were unsupervised.

They were thankful for the change. As much as they loved Jamie and liked the others, they were starting to get antsy constantly being in close proximity to them. The space gave them some time to think and work things out alone.

They wandered for a few minutes before coming across a short drop. They had considered turning back and telling the others, but they didn't want to lead them to yet another dead end. They knew it wasn't wise to wander too far away, especially in wake of Scoutmaster Myres making his presence known, but they preferred to do this alone.

That was, until they were reminded of the so-called "buddy system." They remembered that Riley had brought it up a few days ago back on the beach, and that Jamie had scolded Riley for almost forgoing that same system in the forest. It was entirely possible that if they went alone, it wouldn't go unnoticed, and they would certainly get some kind of lecture about it.

They sighed and turned back before anyone could notice they were gone. They'd just scoop up whoever they saw and send the other with Riley. Being alone seemed like too much of a luxury to have here anyways.

When they returned, they noticed that Riley had already partnered up with Jamie. Luna was close by, constantly scanning the area until their eyes met Jade's. They then waved at Jade and approached them.

"H-Hi Jade! Riley t-told me to wait for you t-to do some s-scouting. Y-You weren't here, so…"

"Hello, Luna." Jade suddenly felt bad for making them wait. "I apologize for making you wait. I wasn't aware that you were."

"I-It's okay!" Luna smiled, though that did little to ease Jade's guilt. In the grand scheme of things, it was extremely minor, but they still felt bad about it.

Jamie groaned. "Cool, everyone's happy now. Can we get moving?" They tapped their foot impatiently.

Riley nodded. "Yeah. You're right. Let's get going, Jamie." They waved to Luna and Jade. "See you two in a bit. Stay safe." The two of them then went to the right and disappeared around the corner.

Jade stared at that same corner until Luna tapped on their right arm. They didn't say anything, but it was clear that they were ready to go.

They returned to the drop that they were once at. Now that they had Luna with them, they didn't feel so guilty about jumping down. There was a ledge just a few feet below them, so neither of them should have any issues reaching it.

As anticipated, both of them scaled down to the ledge with no issues. However, Luna did almost fumble the landing, but Jade was there to catch them.

The two of them walked around for a while, scouring every inch that they could. Jade peered over the edge and spotted a ledge a little off to the left and beneath them. The drop was a little farther down than the previous one, but it seemed relatively safe, so it was certainly an option. It seemed like the only way down—

"W-What's this over h-here, Jade?" Luna inquired. They were pointing at what appeared to be a shortcut. It was a few feet from where they stood. "Y-You, uh, I t-think you missed it."

"Oh." Jade felt silly for not noticing the shortcut. "I… didn't notice that. I did find another way down over here, but we can check out what you found if you'd like."

"C-Can we…?"

"Sure. It doesn't hurt to have multiple options."

Luna responded with a warm smile and led Jade over to the shortcut. Jade wasn't entirely sure why Luna responded the way they did, but they didn't bother to pursue it. They seemed happy in wake of all of the bad things happening to them, so Jade didn't want to disturb them.

They noticed that part of the ledge they were standing on had a small protrusion pointing towards a much larger protrusion from the ledge all the way across the canyon. It was wide enough that it'd support whoever decided to cross, and the gap itself was maybe a few feet at worst. The ground on both sides seemed stable enough to support everyone's weight.

Assuming everyone would be on board with making the jump, they could clear the entire canyon this way and scale up the other wall. If not, Jade did have another path figured out. Deep down, they hoped that everyone would be fine with the shortcut though. The sooner they could make it to the caves, the better.

"What do you make of this?" Jade asked.

Luna peered over the edge and into the depths of the canyon. They shuddered. "Looks s-scary…"

"Yeah, but… consider this." Luna tilted their head. "You made it through the tomb with that scary endless pit, right?"

"R-Right…"

"Now, I'm not saying you should be arrogant because of it but… give yourself some credit. We all overcame that, I think we can overcome this too."

Luna seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. However, they examined the gap one more time and then gave a thumbs-up. "Okay. I t-think I c-can do this."

Jade smiled. That was a better response. "I think so too. Let's go tell Jamie and Riley about this and see what they think."

They didn't have to worry about seeking out Jamie and Riley though, because as soon as they turned around, they spotted those two heading down towards them. They seemed to be a bit disgruntled, so it was possible that going to the right only led to a dead-end. As expected, Jamie was the one to lead the duo.

Luna nearly tackled Jamie in a hug. Jamie stumbled back from the sudden shift in weight, but they managed to keep their balance.

Jamie seemed confused by the affection. "Jeez, you act like I've been gone for a long time." When Luna didn't respond, Jamie decided to return the hug. Jade could've sworn they saw the corners of their mouth curl up a bit. "You happy now?"

Luna finally let go and hugged Riley too. Riley was much more willing—and much less vocal—to return to gesture.

Once Jamie spotted the shortcut, they ran up to it and gazed at it in awe. This didn't come as a surprise to Jade; they were fully expecting that response. Jamie loved these kinds of challenges after all.

That left them with only needing Riley's approval now. Everyone else seemed to take interest in it, but it could all fall apart if one person said "no." Riley often erred on the side of

skepticism, so it was entirely possible they'd refuse to go.

"Yo! Check it out, Riley! I think we found our way across!" Jamie beckoned to Riley.

Luna let go of and decided to trail behind Riley so they could investigate the shortcut.

Riley frowned when they noticed the gap between both sides. "You sure this is the right way?"

Jamie huffed and crossed their arms. "Well, it's either this or going down that one creepy way!"

Jade's brow furrowed. "Creepy… way?"

"Well, maybe 'creepy' isn't the right word but… it was sketchy even for me."

"I see." If *Jamie* thought it was sketchy, then… "I think we're better off taking our chances here."

"I…" Riley groaned. "Okay. I guess this *is* safer than what we found. The jump doesn't seem so bad, so I think we can go this way."

Jamie shrugged. "Eh. We either take one kinda risky jump or keep climbing deeper and risk falling or… something like that. What sounds better to you?"

"Well… in terms of speed, the risky jump, but—"

"That's what I thought." Jamie took a step back. "Alright. Make some space for me!" Everyone complied, giving Jamie adequate space to jump across.

Jamie cleared the gap by a considerable amount and landed on their feet. They turned around to face the group and gave them all a double thumbs-up. They then took a few steps back to give everyone some extra clearance.

Luna was the second one to ready themselves for a jump. This took Jade by surprise since they always got the impression that Luna leaned more towards going last, or as close to last as they could. Regardless, they cleared the jump with ease and beamed with pride when Jamie praised them.

Jade motioned for Riley to go next, but they shook their head, so Jade instead jumped across themselves. Much like Jamie and Luna, they had no issues. They did stumble a bit when landing, but recovered quickly.

Riley was the last to jump across. They didn't get quite enough speed, so their right ankle ended up catching the lip of the ledge. They face-planted just a few feet away from the kids, much to Jamie's entertainment. Jade nudged Jamie very hard in the side—stopping their laughter immediately—and Luna dropped down to their knees to ensure that Riley was okay.

Thankfully, Riley only suffered minor scrapes as a result, none of which required any attention. They did whine a bit and rub the arm that had been messed up from the crash,

though it appeared to not be bleeding, so they chose not to pursue it.

Riley got up and brushed their front side off. “Well, that mishap aside, it seems like we got a lucky break from that canyon.”

Jade nodded. “Agreed. It probably wouldn’t have been too bad regardless, but I’m glad we could skip most of it.”

Jamie groaned. “Yeah yeah, that’s cool and all, but can we get going? We’re still in the middle of a desert.”

“Well, do you have any—” Jade suddenly spotted a slope out of the left corner of their eyes. “Nevermind. I think I found our way up.”

They all approached the slope. It didn’t seem too steep, so they decided to walk up it. Conveniently, the slope led all the way to the top. They *definitely* got a lucky break.

With the canyon behind them, they could finally start making some progress again. All that stood between them and the cave system now was another stretch of the desert. Many of the threats were still present here, so while they were on the home stretch, they still needed to be alert.

However, the sun was starting to creep towards the horizon, which also meant that it was starting to cool off. That did eliminate a couple threats, but that didn’t mean the others would magically disappear.

Jamie hummed. “You know… I just had a random thought. I haven’t seen any tornadoes on this side of the desert.”

“Really?” Jade inquired.

“Yeah. Or tumbleweeds, as a matter of fact. I think we can take it easy now.”

“Huh. Good to know. We should probably still make our way to the caves though. We’ll have plenty of shade there to ‘take it easy.’”

“I guess you’re right. Let’s stop wasting time here and go then.”

Everyone seemed to agree, so they all set off towards the caves.

Having survived both the tomb and the canyon, Jade felt pretty good about their odds. They still needed to remain alert though. If the desert was any indication, there was no way the caves would be merciful to them.

Nothing could be worse than a tomb rigged to the brim with traps or a canyon though… right?

# Chapter 21: Night in the Desert

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Much to their fortune, and as Jamie had predicted, many of the threats they faced prior to the canyon were not present on their way to the caves. While the heat and sun would remain as persistent threats, neither the tornadoes nor tumbleweeds appeared. It seemed as if they remained isolated on the other side of the desert.

In regards to the heat and sun, they did have the grace of nightfall to help them out. In that time, they wouldn't have the sun beating down on them or the heat slowly cooking them alive. It'd provide them with the perfect window to navigate the caves. However, there were still a few hours to go before nightfall, so they'd still need to contend with those threats for some time.

In reality though, it was unlikely that any of them would even *want* to continue through the night. Barring how it would be disruptive to their sleep patterns, everyone had to have been worn out from the tomb and canyon. The desert was really shaping up to be a huge step-up in difficulty from both the beach and forest.

Jamie stopped to stretch and yawn dramatically. After a moment of stretching, they returned to walking.

Neither Luna nor Riley had yawned yet, but it was starting to become evident that both of them were getting tired. Their eyes seemed to be a bit more heavy and their movements more sluggish.

Jade could feel their own fatigue tugging at them, but they chose to ignore it.

If it wasn't the fatigue from the heat and sun, then all of the climbing in the tomb and canyon certainly wore them all out. Jade really hoped that the caves would at least be safe enough to get a few minutes of rest in. All of them could really use a nap.

As they approached the caves, they ripped their focus away from the desire to sleep and towards what was in front of them. Much like what they've seen already, there were both cacti and cacti balls spread out on the ledges and walls. They were still just minor nuisances, but could make things more difficult especially in the caves. The possibility of reaching a dead-end because of a well-placed cactus was much higher.

Jade wasn't sure if they were seeing things or not, but they could've sworn they also saw a pickaxe sticking out of the side of a wall high up. One of the suitcases they saw earlier was a mirage, so it wouldn't surprise them if the pickaxe was also a mirage. Regardless, it was interesting to see in this environment.

Jamie pointed up towards what appeared to be a ledge that was tucked in near the back. The wall leading up to it seemed relatively simple to climb and had the benefit of being accessible from where they stood. It appeared to be shrouded in shade, at least for now, so maybe they'd be able to take a break from the sun for a bit.

"I think that's our way up. And if it's not, well… it at least gives us some shade." Jamie stopped to yawn. "And… a nice spot to maybe take a nap or something like that." It seemed their fatigue dulled their edge just a bit.

Jade stifled a yawn. "Agreed. Let's not waste any time. I think we could all use some rest." Okay, they *definitely* weren't climbing overnight.

Jamie was the first to climb up the wall. They nearly slipped when they grabbed onto a weak chunk of rock and it fell effortlessly out of the wall. Thankfully, they were able to quickly recover and instead grabbed onto where the rock used to be. Once they reached the top, they peered over the edge and gave a thumbs-up to everyone.

Jade decided to go next because they were ready to get up there and settle down for a bit. However, once they lifted themselves off of the ground, it suddenly felt like the whole world was weighing them down. They weren't entirely sure if it was due to the statue in their bag or if they were tired, but they assumed it was the latter since the former wasn't an issue before.

Their entire climb up was a struggle. Fortunately, they didn't have to deal with parts of the wall crumbling, but they still felt excruciatingly heavy. They were barely able to pull themselves up each time. They convinced themselves that if this went on for any longer, they'd just let go and fall back onto the sand below them.

Jamie's upper body popped into view over the edge. Once they spotted Jade struggling, they clasped one hand to the edge and put the other down towards Jade. Without skipping a beat, Jade grabbed onto Jamie's hand.

They did everything they could to help with being pulled up. In spite of carrying the statue, due to Jamie's strength, Jade was pulled up quite easily. Immediately after, they collapsed face-first in the sand and blacked out.

…

Jade groggily opened their eyes.

They immediately noticed that they were on a new surface at a new angle. They were also *moving*. The material felt a bit soft, but also a bit damp on their face and it smelled… *strange*. Not a horrible strange, but an indescribable strange.

They lifted their head up just a bit in an attempt to identify where they were. Their eyes darted around for a bit. They saw just sand and cacti, so they were still in the desert. They turned to their right to identify what they were just laying on. It turned out that they were riding on Riley's back, and what they felt and smelled was their trench coat. *Gross.*

A few questions entered Jade's mind: How did they get there? Weren't they on the ground? *Why* were they being carried anyways?

They didn't feel like finding the answers to any of those questions though. They were too tired to. They instead rested their head in the same spot it laid originally and closed their eyes.

Riley must've noticed this though, because they stopped immediately after.

A voice, *Jamie's* voice, inquired about this. "Why'd you stop, Riley?"

"I think Jade's waking up."

"Oh! Wait… set them down over here."

Jade's weight was suddenly shifted off of Riley's back—they whined at this—and was leaned up against something hard. They figured it was another wall, but they weren't terribly interested in confirming.

They opened their eyes a little wider. They noticed immediately that it was much darker than before. Faint traces of the sun were still present on the horizon, and from what they could see, stars were starting to appear in the sky.

Jamie and Luna sat in front of them, awaiting their return to consciousness. Riley stood a little farther away, their eyes constantly darting around. Were they not safe here?

Luna smiled gently and waved at Jade once they noticed they were a bit more awake. Jamie said nothing, opting instead to nod as a greeting.

Jade groaned and rubbed their forehead. It seemed that they had developed a headache while they were out. "Where are—what happened? Why was I being carried?"

Jamie hummed. "Well… once you collapsed, we decided to just sit beside you and let you get some rest. Luna and I got to take a small nap as well, but then we were shaken awake by Riley because of a scorpion!" Luna shivered at the mention of it. "It was pretty freaking big. We all tried to wake you up, but I guess you were super asleep because you didn't move. So, I grabbed your bag and Riley put you on their back and… now we're here."

Well, that answered all of their questions. The four of them must've not been as safe as they initially thought they were, which would explain how they ended up here.

"That… makes sense."

"Anyways, if you want, you can get some more rest. I don't think any scorpions will get us here."

"…And what about you two?"

"Since the desert and tomb have been kinda rough, we're just gonna settle down here for the night. And, uh, I already worked something out with Riley. Luna gets to be lazy for once. Me

and Riley will be on like… ‘shifts’ or something. I forgot exactly what they said. But, uh, I’ll get some sleep while they watch us, then I’ll wake up and take over, blah blah blah.”

“I can keep an eye on you all too, you know…”

“Yeah, I do know. But I also know that you need to get some more rest.”

Jade sighed and conceded. They didn’t really have the energy to argue. Instead, they just closed their eyes again and waited for unconsciousness to creep back in. They hoped they’d feel better when they woke up again so they could relieve Jamie of their duty.

“Good night, Jade,” was the final thing they heard before falling asleep again.

…

The next time they woke up, it was still dark. This time though, it was Jamie that was on guard. They were seated near the edge staring out towards the sky. Jade couldn’t see their face so they couldn’t tell how they were feeling, but they were slouching a bit. That didn’t raise any immediate red flags though.

Sometime during the night, Riley had settled down beside Jade with an arm wrapped around Luna, both of them sound asleep. Riley seemed to leave Jade alone though, which they appreciated. They hadn’t formed that kind of connection with Riley yet.

They considered going back to sleep but they probably had enough for the time-being. They needed to relieve Jamie so they could get some more rest, and aside from the grogginess, they felt pretty alright.

They leaned forward off of the wall and massaged their forehead for a moment. It seemed their headache had dulled sometime during their second bout of sleep since it no longer hurt when they dared to move.

They tried their best to not make any noise, but Jamie seemed to detect them anyways. They didn’t say anything, but turned towards Jade and patted the ground beside them.

Jade slowly got up then crept over to Jamie then sat down. Neither of them said anything for a while, instead choosing to stare up at the stars in the sky.

Jamie softly chuckled. “This is… nice. I can see why Luna likes this so much.”

“Did you know ‘Luna’ is Latin for ‘moon’?”

“No, I didn’t. But… it’s a very fitting name for someone like them.”

Jade couldn’t help but smile. Just a few days prior, Jamie seemed to hate Luna’s guts, but they grew on each other very quickly. For so long, Jamie struggled to find someone that’d actually give them a chance, and it sounded like Luna never really had friends. So, for that, Jade was glad that things worked out between them.

However, that sweet little moment didn’t last long. Jamie’s smile soon turned into a frown.

Similarly, Jade's smile disappeared. "What's wrong?"

"They don't have anywhere to go after this, do they?"

Jade almost wanted to bring up Scoutmaster Edmond, but figured that'd just fuel the fire. Instead, they remained silent.

"It's not fair." Jamie clenched their fists. "Someone as *nice* as them having such a crappy life."

Jade glanced back at Luna, who had made themselves a bit more comfortable in Riley's side. "I have a feeling that someone would have their back."

Jamie turned around as well. However, they didn't seem any happier about that. "Yeah… I guess so."

Jade definitely noticed. "…Jamie?"

"Maybe I'm gonna sound like an idiot for this but…" Jamie sighed. They hesitated to speak for a minute. "Do you… think Riley would have our backs too?"

Jade hummed. "I don't see why not. I mean… we've only known each other for a few days, but they seem to care about all of us quite a bit." They stopped in search for what to say next. "And… they had no incentive to care about us either. This isn't an ordinary trip. They're not responsible for us, but they took care of us anyways so… I believe they would."

"Yeah…" Jamie sighed. "Hopefully they at least take care of Luna after all of this… or help find someone that will."

"'At least?'" Jade had a suspicion that this choice of words was deliberate, but they weren't certain.

Jamie picked at the frills on their tank top. They didn't make eye contact with Jade.

"*Jamie*."

"I don't wanna go back to Grandma and Grandpa. I wanna… go with Riley instead."

That confirmed their suspicion, but…

"I'm sorry Jamie, but… I don't think it's that easy."

"I know." Jamie's tone sounded so… defeated.

Maybe Jade could salvage this. "If Riley and Luna are still in the area after all of this, maybe we could… still hang out with them sometime?"

"I guess so."

That seemed to have no effect. So much for that.

Jamie got up. “Guess I should get some sleep while I can. Night, Jade.”

“Good night, Jamie.”

Jade wanted to watch Jamie to make sure they settled down with no issues.

Jamie settled down to Riley’s other side and was surprised to notice that Riley subconsciously slung their free arm over them. Jamie took that as their cue to settle in for the night. Once they were comfortable, they closed their eyes. Surprisingly, they seemed content.

Once they knew Jamie was safe and sound, Jade returned their gaze back to the stars. They weren’t particularly happy about how they handled that, or what they learned. They were bothered by how Jamie felt afraid to confide in them about all of that. They hated how much the truth hurt Jamie and that they couldn’t even *do* anything about all of that.

They never gave it any thought before, but it’d only make sense that Jamie had no interest in returning. Jamie had a ton of friction with their grandparents, often times sprouting from unusual or over-the-top punishments for such minor things. Jade tried their best to avoid them, but always came to Jamie’s aid when needed.

And of course, Jade was the one to take care of Jamie most of the time. Their grandparents did provide them with the bare minimum, but there was hardly any love behind it.

Jade’s own underlying resentment towards their grandparents had begun to grow once they found out over a year ago about their true intent for taking the two of them in.

Even now, they didn’t fully understand it, but their grandfather had mentioned some kind of “credit” for keeping them around. Something about taxes, too. Regardless, even if they didn’t know what that credit was, they knew there was some kind of gain from their continued presence. That gain wasn’t love, either.

It didn’t sit right with them then, and it still didn’t sit right with them now.

They only stuck around because they assumed that Jamie was okay with their situation. Well, at least okay enough to not want to consider homelessness. But… if Jamie was saying they didn’t want to go back *and* that they’d prefer to go with someone they met just a few days ago…

It only made Jade feel horrible. Had they known sooner…

Well, all that mattered now was fixing this. Granted, they couldn’t do much if their grandparents refused to let them go, but… it did give them something to reach for. At a minimum, they could just endure the next two years then scoop up Jamie and get out of there. Maybe they could also seek out Riley too for a place to stay, even if temporarily.

At the end of the day, all they wanted to do was make sure that Jamie was happy. They loved them very much and would do *anything* for them. And, since crashing on this island, they’ve come to learn that Jamie felt the same. They had to look out for each other since nobody else would.

But… they needed to focus on the present. They needed to actually get off of the island before they could even worry about their future.

Their night had been pretty rough, but… that was okay. Not everything had to, or would, be sunshine and rainbows. They had adopted that mentality after their parents' deaths.

They leaned back and did some stargazing. It felt oddly therapeutic in wake of everything that happened that day. Maybe Jamie's conversation didn't quite go over well, but they at least got some clarity out of it.

They once again looked at Jamie. They'd nestled into Riley's right side, just like Luna did on their left. It seemed that Jamie had really grown to appreciate and trust both Riley and Luna, which gave Jade a flicker of hope.

Maybe…

Maybe they *could* be a family, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact (I'm not counting them anymore): This chapter was one of those that was a complete PITA to write. I just had different ideas that I had no clue how to write and it was subject to a re-write because of earlier chapters being re-written. I don't recall if I was happy about this chapter or not. Maybe I was though, considering my Discord messages were positive about it.

# Chapter 22: A Better Morning

The next time Jade gained consciousness, the sun was just starting to creep back over the horizon. The air was a bit warmer, but not by much. Their head was leaned up against something both fuzzy and lightly damp. Quite an odd combination, but also oddly comfortable too.

Their headache was still faintly present. It was nowhere near enough to debilitate them anymore, but they'd probably still need to keep an eye on it. The heat, lack of water and exertion from climbing would all likely work together to make it worse in the near future.

Last they remembered, it was still the middle of the night. They knew they weren't a time-traveler, so it was strange that it suddenly went from the dead of night to dawn.

The unexplainable time-skip, the fact they were leaning up against something or someone…

It dawned on them pretty quickly. They had to have fallen asleep during the night. That didn't make any sense though. They were well-rested and alert and—

They felt a gentle touch on the back of their left shoulder. "Relax, Jade," Riley whispered.

Once their breathing re-stabilized, they sat up and stared at a random scorpion down below. "Riley? Was I asleep all night?"

"Well, not *all* night. You were still barely awake when I got up. When I sat down with you though, you immediately collapsed into my side."

"Sorry, I thought I was—"

"You don't need to apologize for *sleeping*, Jade." Riley sighed. "It's fine, I was awake anyways. No harm, no foul."

It was then that Jade finally looked at Riley and softly smiled. However, they quickly noticed that Riley's trench coat was missing, which prompted the following question.

"Hey Riley, where's your coat?" Jade inquired.

"Well… when I woke up, I noticed both Jamie and Luna were sleeping with me. I didn't wanna wake them up, so I gave them my coat as a blanket. Figured they'd be a bit more comfortable since it was chilly when I got up."

Jade couldn't help but smile at the visual that popped up in their head. It only proved how close they've grown since meeting. However, it also pained them that much more that they'd have to part ways eventually. Everyone had their own lives to get back to, whether they liked it or not.

They were also reminded of the conversation they had with Jamie during the night. As much as they wanted to bring it up with Riley, they wanted Jamie to be present for it too. So instead, they sought confirmation for one thing.

“Riley?”

Riley hummed in acknowledgment. Jade took that as their cue to continue.

“Once we get back to the airport, could you… keep an eye on us until we have to go back with our grandparents?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t leave until you’re all taken care of.”

“Okay, thanks…”

“Why do you ask?”

The *real* reason is because they secretly hoped their grandparents wouldn’t show and that Riley would scoop them up. If not for themselves, then for Jamie, at a bare minimum. Riley couldn’t know that though.

“I, uh… I’d just prefer if you stuck around until we’re accounted for.”

It was evident by the look on Riley’s face that they absolutely didn’t buy that.

Riley shook their head. “Neither of you actually want to go back to them, do you? Is that why?”

Jade’s stomach dropped. That was *exactly* why, but how did Riley even figure that out? Were they… eavesdropping earlier?

“H-How—”

“Just an observation from what I can tell. Maybe I’m wrong. Willing to bet I’m not though, based on your reaction. So…?”

Well, they’ve figured it out. No point in hiding it now.

“…You’re right.”

“I figured. Well, unfortunately, the best I can do is make sure the transfer is peaceful. Can’t really do much else while they’ve got custody over you.” Riley hummed. “Though… I do have an offer for you in spite of that.”

Jade tilted their head to the side. “An offer?”

“Yeah. While I can’t actually take you in, assuming that’s your end goal, I *can* at least keep my door open for you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, if you need to talk to me, or if you just need to get yourself or Jamie away from the noise… I’d be happy to let you visit. Don’t gotta call or anything.”

That seemed like a fair compromise. It also seemed a lot more reasonable than what they wanted too, given the circumstances. In the event that Riley couldn’t actually *take* them, at least having the opportunity to visit seemed nice.

Jade smiled for the first time that day. “Okay. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Riley extended a hand. “Cool. Let’s shake on it.” Jade grabbed their hand and shook it without skipping a beat. “Oh, and, I’ll give you my address and everything once we get out of here.”

Not long after the two of them let go, Riley’s eyes widened suddenly, as if they remembered something. “Also, *hypothetically speaking*, if your grandparents decided they didn’t want you two anymore, you’ll be taken care of. That much I can say.”

Jade immediately wrapped Riley in a hug. “Thank you, Riley…” The gesture felt odd since they weren’t a terribly affectionate kid, but their emotions dictated they do it.

Riley returned the hug and patted Jade on the back. “Of course, Jade.”

After the hug ended, the two of them smiled at each other and returned to where they sat.

A lot of pressure had been lifted off of Jade’s shoulders, and they felt truly good for the first time in a long time. While the lack of assurance on actually *staying* with them was a bit disconcerting, the guarantee that they’d at least have someone to fall back on made them happy. It was so tiring growing up and having to deal with life alone.

The two of them had fallen into a comfortable silence, though it didn’t last for long. Jade’s stomach growled, which meant they were hungry. They’d almost completely forgotten they needed food. *Oops.*

They started to get up in search of food, but Riley gently pushed them back down. They seemed confused by the gesture.

“Sorry, but I think you deserve to just sit still for a minute.”

“Riley, I can…”

“Get your own food? I know that, silly. I also know you’ll just try to scrape by with the bare minimum too, and that’s not gonna fly under my watch.”

“But…”

“No ‘if’s, ‘and’s, or ‘but’s, got it?”

Jade nodded. “Got it.”

“Cool. Just wait here until I dig through Luna’s backpack.

Why Luna's backpack specifically? They weren't carrying much aside from medical supplies, the likely spoiled Thick Mints and—

Riley pulled out the yellow winterberry from Luna's bag.

*Ah.*

Riley returned to Jade's side and began fidgeting with the berry, likely plotting a way to split it evenly.

"What about Jamie and Luna?"

"They devoured the Thick Mints, didn't they? I think we deserve a sweet treat every once in a while too."

Jade felt conflicted about this. On one hand, maybe they did deserve something nice every once in a while. On the other hand though… they couldn't help but feel bad about taking that away from the younger kids.

With a soft grunt, Riley managed to split open the winterberry. It wasn't the most pretty split, but it was still a split. Some juice escaped from both halves, but it still looked very delicious otherwise. If they had no self-control, they'd be drooling at the sight.

Riley dropped the larger half in Jade's hands and quickly bit into their own. It seemed that this decision was not up for debate.

They glanced over at Riley as if they needed confirmation. Riley gave a reassuring nod. Jade then pulled the berry up to their mouth to take a bite and…

Fortunately, it seemed neither the heat nor the climb ruined the berry. It tasted incredibly sweet and savory. They couldn't quite pinpoint what fruit it closely resembled… but it had hints of both lemon and raspberry, maybe even others. The juice that gushed with every bite was so refreshing that they could swear off water and survive off of only the juice. It felt *invigorating*.

The worst part of it was actually finishing it. After no time, they'd swallowed the final bite and frowned once they noticed it was over. It did make them feel really good though, so they couldn't complain too much.

They went to brush their hands on their shorts but noticed that several splotches of juice had already stained them. They felt embarrassed at allowing themselves to be so messy while eating, but it was too late to do anything about that now. Instead, they folded their hands in their lap in a vain attempt to cover up their mess.

Riley chuckled. "Don't worry about it, Jade. I'm not gonna judge you for it."

"Still… it's not very clean—"

"Look, no offense Jade, but for several days you haven't showered, you've been sweating and you've been sleeping on the ground, but *that's* where you draw the line?"

Jade couldn't even argue that. Riley *did* have a point. It was difficult to argue cleanliness when they were the complete opposite of that—albeit not by choice—and couldn't do anything about it. At the same time though, it was still inappropriate to make such a mess, and if they could control even one thing about their cleanliness, they absolutely would.

"I get it. Just… trying to not make a mess where I can, I guess."

Riley sighed. "Yeah. I know. I'm sorry, just…"

"We have bigger problems to deal with. It's okay, I'm just being dramatic."

"Stop. You're fine."

"…Okay."

The two of them sat in an awkward silence for a little while until Riley mournfully sighed.

"Riley?"

"I do miss being able to take a shower."

Jade smirked. "Thought we had bigger problems to deal with?"

Riley playfully, and very gently, elbowed Jade. "Hush."

Their little moment was interrupted by soft grunts and whines from behind. It was most likely just one of the younger kids waking up, but they were curious as to who it was.

They looked back for just a moment and confirmed that it was Jamie arising from their slumber. They didn't want to stare though, so they instead watched the sunrise.

Well… they weren't going to stare, until Jamie made a very disgusted "blegh" sound.

Jamie had turned their nose up and pulled Riley's coat off of themselves as best as they could. They crept out from beneath it and from besides Luna, but froze when Luna started muttering something.

"P-Please… don't leave me…" Luna whined. It appeared to just be sleep-talk, but still caught both Jade and Jamie by surprise.

Jamie scrambled to find their Bing Bong plush and then shoved it in Luna's hands. Luna hugged it as tightly as they could as a smile formed on their face. Jamie then gently covered up Luna with Riley's coat.

"You should wash that thing some time, Riley," Jamie whispered.

"Let me know when you come across a washing machine out here, okay?"

"Sure," Jamie replied sarcastically.

Jamie then sat down beside Jade. Jade gave a small wave and Jamie returned the gesture with an equally small wave.

“Good morning, Jamie. Sleep well?”

“Mornin’, Jade. Yeah, I—” Jamie’s gaze moved down. *Oh no.* They smirked. “Didn’t know you were a messy eater, Jade.”

Jade scrambled to justify the mess they made. “I, uh—”

Jamie scoffed. “Jeez, relax. I’m just messing with you.”

Riley stood up and approached Luna’s backpack once more. “You hungry, Jamie?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Alright…” Riley pulled out the box of Thick Mints. “You feeling these this morning?”

“Hmm…” Jamie grabbed the box and opened it. They frowned immediately. “Guess not.” They pulled out the bag, revealing a mess of cookie and fudge on the inside of it. “Still got that winterberry?”

A pang of guilt suddenly hit Jade. It turns out that they ate the very thing that Jamie had taken interest in. However, before they could apologize, Riley spoke up.

“I’m afraid not. I split it with Jade earlier.”

Jamie stared at Jade for a moment, then shrugged. “’kay. I guess I’ll just take whatever’s available..”

Jamie once again glared at Jade. “Don’t even.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know that look. You feel bad about eating it, don’t you? Well, don’t.”

“But—”

Jamie shoved an open hand in Jade’s face. “Nope! Not listening to it!”

Riley cleared their throat. The siblings turned around to Riley holding out some food. “Hey, uh, I’ve got some choices for you Jamie.” They held an ordinary mushroom in one hand and a red shroomberry in the other. “Didn’t think you’d want the thornberry so… here’s your options.”

Jamie rubbed their chin as they thought about their options. Jade assumed they’d immediately pick the shroomberry, so this came as a surprise. They didn’t think Jamie would even *consider* the other mushroom given the other choice they had.

Jamie, surprisingly, pointed towards the mushroom. “I’ll take that one. Let Luna have the shroomberry.”

Riley smiled. “Of course. That was the plan.” They then handed the mushroom to Jamie. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” Jamie turned back around and immediately tore into the berry. Jade ended up watching the sunrise while Jamie ate.

Riley sighed. “I suppose I should get Luna up. We can’t stay here all day, and they need to eat too.”

Jamie nudged Jade in the side. “You good?”

“Uh… yes? Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure. You seem a bit on edge this morning.”

“I’m alright.” They paused, deciding whether or not to disclose what they talked about with Riley. “I ended up having a chat with Riley about what we talked about last night.”

Jamie seemed much more interested now. “Yeah? And?”

“They can’t exactly take us, but… they’ll leave their door open for us at a minimum.”

“And what if… you know…?”

‘You know’ was code for ‘our grandparents giving us up’ or some variation. Jade knew that very well.

“They were kinda vague about it, but said we’d be ‘taken care of,’ whatever that means.”

Jamie hummed. They seemed to be satisfied by that response. “Thanks for that.”

“I figured you’d be upset about me doing that without you.”

“Nah. I… uh, was kinda afraid to talk to them about it, I guess. So… thanks.”

Jade patted Jamie on the back. They didn’t say anything, but Jamie seemed to understand the gesture nonetheless. Jamie leaned in for a side hug, which Jade happily provided.

It made them feel warm and fuzzy in their heart. Like… they didn’t feel hopeless for once. With Jamie on board with this arrangement, Jade felt a lot better about their situation. Maybe they couldn’t actually be a “family” with Riley but at the very least they could confide in them *and* they also had a safe space with them.

”Hey, you two!” On cue, the two of them turned around. Riley stood not too far behind them with a freshly bandaged arm and Luna glued to their side.

Jade waved. Riley and Luna responded with a nod and wave respectively. “Oh, hello you two. Sorry, were we taking too long?”

“Huh? Oh, no.” Riley shook their head. “You’re fine. Luna just finished eating and tending to my bandage, so…” Riley’s eyes shifted over to Jamie. “Jamie, I’d suggest having Luna check your cuts out while we’re here.”

Jamie glanced over at Jade, who silently responded with a nod.

Jamie shrugged. “Sure. Guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

Jamie then got up and walked past Riley with Luna to be examined. Jade wanted to give them some semblance of privacy, so they looked away. Jamie would likely follow up with them anyways if they felt the need to, so they didn’t need to observe.

Jade finally got up themselves. They felt a bit wobbly when their headache surged, but it quickly subsided and allowed them to re-stabilize. If it was going to stick around, it’d likely be a problem in the future. For now though, they chose to ignore it. After all, it was just a headache, it’d go away eventually… right?

“I take it we’re leaving soon?” Jade inquired.

“Correct. As much as I don’t want to go back out into the heat and sun, the sooner we get to the next camp, the better.”

“Agreed. At least there we can actually relax.”

Riley hummed in agreement. “Well, if there’s nothing else you need to do or talk about, we’re gonna get moving once Jamie is taken care of.”

Well, they *did* have that headache, but that was a lot harder to cure than open wounds so…

“I’ve got nothing else, so that sounds good to me.”

They weren’t entirely happy about lying about that, but they didn’t want to cause more of a burden over something that couldn’t just have a Band-Aid slapped over it. They’d probably bring it up at the next camp if it continued to be an issue.

The conversation abruptly, and awkwardly, ended there.

It seemed that Riley was not the greatest at socializing. It didn’t change how Jade viewed them, but it was still interesting to take note of.

Rather than stand there awkwardly, they grabbed their bag. They had forgotten how heavy it was because of the statue, but nevertheless, they slung the straps across their shoulders. The sudden addition of weight made their arms ache, but they chalked it up to simply being worn out.

They’d likely end up messing with the statue when they were somewhere safer. Their curiosity wanted answers. It was way too enticing and well-protected to not have any value or

purpose.

They took a glance over at Jamie, though it seemed that Luna was not applying new Band-Aids. In fact, they gave a thumbs-up and Jamie put their tank-top back down. Had the wounds healed enough to not need to be covered? They *were* smaller cuts and scrapes, so it made sense if that was the case.

“Hey, listen up, you three!” Riley exclaimed. “If everyone is done with their business here, I propose that we continue moving. As always, I’d like for you to take charge Jamie. Uh, well, if you want to, that is.”

Nobody objected. Jamie seemed to be in agreement with this arrangement.

“I’ll take your silence as being ready.” Riley looked at Jamie and nodded. “Whenever you’re ready Jamie, we’ll follow.”

Jamie took a step towards the ledge and scanned the surrounding area, presumably for a way up. After a few minutes, they pointed over towards another shaded area. “Let’s head over there and work from there.”

Riley looked over at the area and nodded. “Sounds good. After you.”

Jamie started scaling down the wall, and as expected, both Riley and Luna followed behind them. It seemed that Jade would be trailing in the back again, which they had no problem with. They gazed at their makeshift camp before silently wishing it farewell and made their descent after the others.

They held their head a little higher today. A lot of things had gone well in the morning and they felt pretty confident that things would go their way from here on out.

All they had to do now was actually survive to be able to see all of that through.

# Chapter 23: (Un)expected Turn of Events

For a few hours, everything seemed to be going relatively well. Aside from the occasional scorpion skittering by in the sand, some of which tried to be aggressive, the caves had actually been treating them quite well. They had seen some red cylinders—later identified as dynamite—during their travels, though they were fortunate enough to not have to deal with any of it up close.

While everyone was content with their morning, they spared no time for conversation. Unless it was to call-out something or to request aid, nobody said a word. Even with the rest they'd gotten the night before, it was abundantly clear they were still tired of being there. While the shade did provide solace from direct sunlight, it was fleeting and it did nothing to make the heat more bearable.

Jade's headache hadn't improved much, though at the same time, it hadn't gotten worse either. While they were grateful that it decided to spare them from the worst of it, they would've been more appreciative if it was gone entirely. Regardless, they likely weren't going to be fully relieved of it until they made it somewhere where the environment was less brutal.

Following the thought of making it somewhere, a question popped into their mind: When were the caves going to end? They'd been climbing for quite some time and there was no clear indicator they were reaching the end. Any time they thought they were making progress, they were either met with a dead-end or just more caves.

The only indication of their progress was to peer over the edge and look back down into the desert, though that had been completely shrouded by fog some time ago. Fog in a desert didn't exactly make sense to them, but climbing a mountain with varying climates taught them to just embrace the unexpected.

Jade's thoughts were disrupted when they collided with Jamie. Fortunately, neither of them fell down, but Jamie was irritated nonetheless. When Jamie saw that Jade was utterly confused, they just laughed if off and swiftly moved on from it.

Jamie pointed up towards the sky. "Check it out! There's a cloud. Haven't seen one of those since we got here."

Jade soon spotted the cloud that Jamie was pointing out. From what they could see, it was light gray with darker tones, wispy and long. It seemed like an odd cloud, but clouds did come in all sorts of shapes, colors and sizes, so perhaps they were looking into it too much.

Riley hummed. "Is it really a cloud? It's strange that we'd only see one this far into our travels in the desert."

"Duh! It's a desert, what did you think would happen? Cloudy days like back in the city?"

"I mean…" Riley sighed. "I suppose you do have a point, but it's still just strange…"

Riley raised a valid point, which made Jade question whether or not it was a cloud. It was entirely a possibility that a stray cloud could be passing through, but… it *was* strange.

They suddenly picked up on a waft of smoke. It was a rather suffocating smell and an ugly reminder of what ended their happy little family. They hated that it reminded them of *that* every time they smelled it, but if nothing else, it at least meant they were getting close to another campsite. To that extent, they'd welcome it.

At the same time, their head randomly throbbed in pain. It wasn't unbearably so, but it was enough to break their focus on the smoke. They instinctively rubbed their head where it hurt even though they knew it'd do nothing. Thankfully, it faded quickly, allowing them to once again focus on what was in front of them.

They were really starting to wonder how they even got a headache in the first place. They didn't really know the causes of a headache, but it must've had something to do with the fact they've not been getting adequate food or drink, or that they've been running around in a literal desert. Regardless, it was a nuisance to deal with.

Jamie sniffed the air twice. "Wait, that kinda smells like smoke! I think we're gettin' close!" They almost immediately started excitedly fidgeting. They also understood what the smoke meant.

Riley seemed confused. "Smo—" They too sniffed the air. "Holy sh—uh, yeah, you're right!"

Luna sniffed the air too but seemed disheartened. Had they not picked up on the smoke like everyone else? Their sadness ended up fading quickly though because everyone else's excitement rubbed off on them.

Riley cleared their throat. "Listen, I know spotting this smoke is something to be excited about, but… we still need to be careful. While we are getting close, we don't know *how* we're getting up there yet, so… let's just continue to take it nice and slow, alright?"

Jade silently nodded in agreement, while both Jamie and Luna visibly deflated. Even though Jade wasn't the one to make that statement, they still felt bad to an extent. Those two just wanted to leave, so they had the right to be excited. At the same time though, Riley was correct. Rushing and being reckless now would only hurt them.

Jamie let out a deep sigh. "You got any ideas on where to go then?"

Riley shook their head. "Figured that was your thing."

"Well, *excuse me* for asking." Jamie then crossed their arms, turned away from Riley and grumbled something under their breath.

Riley seemed to regret making that comment, but Jamie didn't give them an opportunity to reconcile if they truly felt bad.

Jade's eyes soon landed on a path that seemed to wrap around to the outside. They weren't entirely sure if it led anywhere, or if it was even safe, but… maybe it'd give them a lead. It

was better than wandering around aimlessly if nothing else.

“Whatcha lookin’ at, Jade?” Jamie tilted their head.

Jade stared at the path for a while longer before pointing towards it. “Looks like a path. Not sure if it leads anywhere and it’s in direct sunlight, so…” They shrugged. “Seems sketchy, but we could check it out and see if it leads anywhere.”

“It’s something at least. Beats wandering around until we find something.”

Riley sighed. “I really don’t think we should go that way.”

Jade’s eyebrows furrowed. “Who said anything about going that way? I just suggested checking it out.”

Their headache once again flared up. Now *really* wasn’t a good time now that they were starting to get irritable. They did their best to keep their composure though. They really didn’t want their ragtag troop to start fracturing now of all times.

Riley struggled to come up with a response. Jade sighed. “I’d like to check it out. I’ll come back if I find something or if things get sketchy. Promise.”

Riley’s gaze narrowed. “Fine, but you’re not going alone and you need to come right back as soon as you find something, or if something goes wrong, got it?”

Jade nodded. “Got it.” They then glanced over at Jamie. Without even saying anything, Jamie seemed to understand and joined them by their side.

“Well, then I suppose Luna and I will snoop around in the area here. The way up from here isn’t really clear, but I’d prefer to stay in the shade than go out there.” Riley shrugged. “Regardless, *any* way up is better than lingering here.”

”Sounds good. Jamie and I should probably get going. The sooner we check this out, the sooner we can get back inside.”

“Finally! I’m itching to do some actual exploring!” Jamie groaned.

Riley seemed entertained by Jamie’s sentiment and chuckled. “Alright, well, I’ll leave you two to it then.” Luna sneakily slipped their hand into Riley’s. The two of them smiled at each other. “I guess it’s time for us to head out too. Meet up back here?”

Jade glanced over at Jamie, who simply nodded. “Sure, sounds good. See you soon and good luck.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Once Riley and Luna departed to explore other parts of the caves, so too did Jade and Jamie to explore the outside path. They were both really curious to see what was out there.

The two of them stopped once they approached the line that separated them from the brutal sun.

Once they took a step over it, they'd be dealing with much more intense heat and being in direct contact with the sun. Neither of those things sounded particularly exciting, especially considering their headache, but they've come too far to back out now. If nothing else, they had Jamie there to help them if the worst happened, but they really hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"We're not even outside yet and it already feels hotter here. This sucks!" Jamie whined.

Jamie was correct. It was noticeably warmer where they stood as opposed to being deeper in the caves. It didn't really come as a surprise since it was basic knowledge they picked up both from their science class and from experience, but they still empathized with Jamie all the same.

On the topic of class, they were suddenly reminded of… well, everything else they have gone without in the past few days. They were really starting to miss—

Jamie gently pat Jade on the back. "Yeah, I'm ready to get out of here too. Let's just… uh, focus on this for now, okay?"

Jade sighed wistfully. "Right. Sorry. Let's go." They then motioned for Jamie to continue, which they did with no objections.

They were quickly met by a blast of both heat and light. Fortunately, their hat did have some effect in lessening both of those, but they were still caught off-guard nonetheless. *Unfortunately*, in spite of their hat, their headache didn't seem appreciate the change.

The pain wasn't unbearable by any means, but it was probably the worst they've felt since it started. Their head started throbbing immediately. They subconsciously groaned and rubbed their head in response, earning a glare from Jamie.

They were quickly regretting suggesting to investigate the path, but again… it was too late to back out now.

They shook their head and continued forward, but stopped once they noticed Jamie was looking up at something. They decided to look where Jamie was looking and spotted what appeared to be a pickaxe sticking out of the wall. Maybe they could use that to their advantage?

They then looked back down at Jamie, who was already staring at Jade with this look on their face: the kind of look that said "let's check this out!"

Jade shook their head. "No, Jamie. We need to go back to Riley and Luna before we go up."

That wasn't really the entire reason, but they didn't want to concern Jamie with their headache. Was it really lying if they "accidentally" forgot some details?

“And what if this ends up leading nowhere? We’d be wasting *everyone’s* time, not just ours, by checking it later instead of now.”

Jade sighed. “*Fine*, but come back down whether you find anything or not so we can report back to the others, okay?”

“You’re not coming up?”

“You think that pickaxe can hold the weight of both of us?” They figured that wouldn’t be enough, so they came up with another excuse to cover up their headache. “And, uh, I want to stay down here… just in case.” *Great job, Jade!*

Jamie’s gaze narrowed. “Uh… okay, sure.” Just as they began to climb, they muttered something under their breath. “*Weirdo…*”

Jade watched Jamie intently as they scaled up the wall. They seemed to be doing it so effortlessly, as if it was second nature to them. In a way, Jade envied them for having that much stamina to climb like that.

Their headache once again throbbed, making sure they didn’t forget about it. They instinctively winced at the pain but couldn’t brush it off like they did last time.

Jamie dropped down in front of them with concern painted on their face. It seemed like Jade’s luck had run out with dodging confrontation on this.

“Seriously, what’s wrong with you?”

“It’s noth—”

“Liar.”

Jade blinked in confusion. “…Huh?” What Jamie said hadn’t quite registered in their mind yet.

“You’re *lying*.”

Now it did. *Ouch.*

“I’m sorry,” Jade weakly muttered.

“I don’t want an apology, I want an explanation.” Jamie’s scowl eased up when they noticed Jade shrinking in on themselves. “Actually… just save it for when we’re back in the shade. I saw enough up there.”

Jamie marched back towards the caves while Jade dragged themselves along.

Both the pain and the guilt from being called a liar weighed heavily on them. Jamie wasn’t *wrong* for it, but that didn’t make it feel any better to hear. They’d spent a few years trying their best to be honest with Jamie, and a headache is when they start being dishonest? A *headache*?

They soon reached the cave and were greeted by Riley and Luna, who were waiting close-by. The two of them tried to approach Jamie and Jade to figure out what was going on, but Jamie put out a hand to stop them. They then pointed towards a wall and Jade slinked over to it and sat down without question.

Jamie glanced over at Luna and waved to them. “Hey, uh… Luna? Could you… maybe figure out what’s up with them? I dunno if I can.”

Luna quickly jumped into action and nearly collided into Jade as a result. They barely skidded to stop just in front of them and dropped to their knees. Much to Jade’s displeasure, Luna examined their face and other visible skin for any signs of… anything, really. At a minimum, they did take care not to be too invasive.

Luna frowned. “I… I d-don’t see anything…” Their voice started to crack. “I don’t k-know. I’m s-sorry.”

As much as they didn’t want to, Jade mustered the energy to speak. “Head hurts, that’s all…” They then tried to bring a hand up to give Luna a pat on the arm, but they slipped just out of reach.

Riley hummed. “Must be pretty bad if it’s got you like this… You sure it’s just a headache?”

“I think so?”

Riley rubbed the bridge of their nose. “Damn it… We’ve really gotta find some food or water or *something*.”

Luna lit up as if they suddenly got an idea. “Oh! W-What about…” They haphazardly tossed their backpack on the ground and dug out the spare coconut from the oasis. They cracked it open and shoved it into Jade’s hands. “T-There! It won’t h-help immediately, but… m-maybe you’ll feel better w-with some food and s-something to drink…?”

Jade stared at the coconut. “What about—”

“We’re fine. You need it more than us,” Jamie said, their voice laced with irritation.

“Okay…”

Jade then dug into the coconut without further hesitation. They quickly gulped down the water and scarfed down the meat. It had no immediate effect, but it’d at least put their hunger and thirst at bay for now.

Jamie flopped down beside Jade and leaned up against the same wall. “So, what’d you two find?”

Luna and Riley sat down in front of the siblings. They then stared at each other until Riley volunteered to speak up. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah. Just…” Riley sighed. “More dead-ends…” Luna frowned.

“Well… Jade and I found some pickaxe in the wall out there. I climbed up there and only scouted out the immediate area before… well…” They pointed at Jade. “Anyways, it seems like it could be a quicker way up.”

“What about Jade?”

Jamie raised an eyebrow. “Sorry?”

“What do we do about Jade? They’re not really in any condition to climb.”

“You carried them before, didn’t you? Maybe carry them and I’ll carry their backpack again?”

Riley hummed. “We could do that.”

“I mean, if it’s really a headache… climbing in the sun isn’t gonna help them.” Luna hummed in agreement.

Jade turned their head to meet Jamie’s eyes. “Aren’t you… mad?”

“Meh. Holding grudges isn’t healthy. I’m just concerned about you now.”

Jade smiled softly. “I… thanks, Jamie.”

“Sure, whatever.” They re-focused on Riley. “So… how’s that sound, Riley?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Jamie rose and scooped up Jade’s backpack following Riley’s approval. “Cool. Let’s get going then. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner Jade can start recovering.”

Riley too stood up and then turned around and crouched in front of Jade.

“What are you…?”

“Offering you a piggyback ride.”

“Oh. Okay.”

With Luna’s assistance, Jade was able to stand up and approach Riley. After they draped their arms over Riley’s shoulders, Riley grabbed the back of their legs and lifted up.

To be able to properly lean up against Riley, they took off their hat and just tossed it to the ground. Luna picked it up though and placed it atop their own head. *How cute.*

Once Jade was secure, Riley started moving. When they made it outside, they instinctively buried their face completely in Riley’s coat to shield themselves from the sun. With the newfound darkness, their headache dulled. They decided to remain there to revel in the comfort.

“Ready to go up, Jade?”

“Huh…?” They pulled away just long enough to see Jamie beckoning to them from above. They didn’t remain there for long though since their head started hurting again. “Oh, sure.”

“Okay. Hold on tight.”

Jade did as they were told and tightened their grip on Riley. At the same time, fatigue crept in. They were probably tired after everything, but it felt wrong to sleep again so soon.

Their fatigue didn’t give them a choice though. The edges of their vision began to blur. They had no choice but to accept it as their eyes slowly closed and their senses slowly slipped away from them. There was just one thing that stuck in their mind as they slipped into unconsciousness though.

They couldn’t help but feel they’ve let Jamie down.

# Chapter 24: Hope

The next time Jade woke up, and actually stayed awake, they were laying down on the ground, though they weren't able to identify where they were. They didn't see any caves, or the sky, but instead an umbrella shielding them and their upper half from the sun. Riley's coat was draped over the lower half of their body. They could also smell the same smoke they smelled earlier, but it was much stronger this time around.

What they did know is that they had to have been safe. There's no way they'd be left unattended and covered up like this unless they were somewhere safe. Neither Jamie nor their friends would allow that to happen. Maybe they were at that campsite they were looking for earlier?

Their headache had once again been reduced to nothing but a dull ache. Though, at this point, they knew better than to think they were in the clear. If that episode from exploring with Jamie was any indication of their condition, they really needed to take it easy while they could. They couldn't afford to keep being out of commission, else they'd just start being a liability.

Although they didn't really want to get up, they needed to. If nothing else, they at least needed to figure out where they were and where everyone else was at. After that, they'd probably be able to relax again if they really wanted to.

Almost immediately after sitting up, they spotted the ever-so familiar campfire and statue present in every camp. If those two objects were there, that could only mean they were in yet another campsite.

A campsite meant they were safe. That was a relief.

Though… that meant Riley ended up carrying Jade all the way to the top. A twang of guilt tugged at Jade. Why didn't Riley, or anyone else for that matter, bother to wake them up?

Something else they noticed was a bottle of…

Uh…

That can't be a real drink, right?

*Tryhard Sweat?*

Upon further examination, the bottle *did* mention that it wasn't real sweat but… really? Why was *that* the name? Who even left it there? Why'd nobody drink it?

They decided that such a menial matter wasn't worth working themselves up over. They wanted another, and more deeper, look at the camp.

The fire was still raging on, though three of the four stakes had been picked clean of its food. The other stake still had a hot dog impaled on it, waiting for them to gobble it down. They didn't feel hungry at the moment though, so they'd eat it some other time.

They also noticed a third backpack sitting with the others by the fire. They were uncertain of who claimed it, but it seemed to already be carrying a few items. They knew Jamie was in possession of their backpack, but that was supposed to only be a temporary arrangement, so who…?

Oh well. They'd figure it out later.

They spotted the others standing around the statue near the west side of camp. Riley and Luna were watching Jamie intently as they read the two pages in their hands. One of the pages seemed inconspicuous, but the other…

They couldn't make out what the smaller black text was, but what they could make out was the jagged red text that read:

**THEY LEFT ME BEHIND**

What does that mean? Who was "they?" Hell, who was "me?" Why were they left behind? There were too many questions with not enough answers. That was *not* the conclusion they wanted to reach with such an ominous page.

Riley took that page and stared at it for a long while. The look on their face contorted from concern to horror as something seemingly clicked in their head.

*Wait.*

Jade suddenly recalled that Riley mentioned something about seeing some kind of page in their nightmare on the beach. They didn't mention any text specifically, but they *did* mention Rule 0. If that page had *that* written on it… and if Scoutmaster Myres was the one to show it to them in their nightmare…

It was starting to make a little more sense now.

Those had to have been Scoutmaster Myres' journal entries leading up to his demise. The nightmares and visions he planted in Jamie and Riley's heads weren't just to mess with them, they were *warnings*. Warnings so they all wouldn't end up like him.

*Huh. Maybe he's not evil after all.*

Riley returned the page to Jamie. Jamie shrugged and tucked the pages into their pocket. They then hovered their hands just inches over the statue's.

Jade almost sprung up from their spot to stop Jamie but then remembered Jamie was already cursed, so what was the worst that could happen? A double curse?

Jamie glanced over at Riley, seemingly to seek approval for something. Once Riley nodded, their hands came into contact with the statue's and its upper half crumbled almost

immediately. Additionally, what appeared to be a white lantern materialized out of thin air and dropped into its hands. The three of them stared at it momentarily before Jamie took it then showed it off to Riley and Luna.

*So that's where Riley got that weird rope from…*

Jade folded Riley's coat and set it in the sand by the handle of the umbrella. They then stood up and paused, almost afraid to go back into the light. They wanted to check in with the others though, so after a deep breath, they took a step out from beneath the umbrella and…

They were fine? Their head didn't start screaming in pain, nor was it really that bad outside. The air was significantly cooler and the sun didn't hurt anymore, so maybe they'd gone high enough for it to stop being an issue. That didn't mean their headache was gone though, it just meant that the conditions were better for them to recover.

Now that the umbrella wasn't shielding them from the sun, they noticed that the sun was far past its peak and closing in on the horizon to the west. Even though it was close to being nighttime, they weren't exactly ready to sleep. The others would be though, *especially* Riley, so they'd end up being alone for the night.

They weren't too pleased with that realization but it wasn't fair to expect anyone to mess up their sleep for them. One person disrupting their sleep pattern was already bad enough. Adding three more on would just make things worse. Instead, the best they could do was catch up with them while they still had the chance.

They slowly raised their weight off of the ground. After a moment of re-stabilizing and anticipating pain that never came, they took a step out from beneath the umbrella.

They fully expected the sun to still be brutal enough to knock them down, but instead…

They were fine? Their head didn't even scream in pain or try to force them to pass out. It was just… okay. They still wouldn't let their guard down though, because that could change in an instant, and they weren't really ready to be treated like a baby by everyone again.

They slowly shuffled over towards the statue where everyone was still standing. They were all deep in conversation though, so none of them seemed to notice as Jade approached.

Well, none except Luna.

Luna slipped away while Jamie and Riley were chatting to meet Jade. Jade attempted to sidestep them, but instead got dragged along to the fire.

Jade *really* wanted to reconvene with Jamie, but Luna clearly had other plans in mind for them. Maybe they'd find an opportunity to talk to Jamie later. For now, they'd listen to what Luna had to say. They seemed quite anxious after all.

Once the two of them got comfortable around the fire, Luna spoke up. "I-I don't w-wanna go back…"

"Huh?"

“He’s gonna be m-mad at me…” Tears immediately pricked at the corners of their eyes. *Poor kid.* “I c-can’t even d-die—”

“*Enough*.”

“B-But…”

Jade pulled Luna in for a hug before they could continue. Luna folded immediately and broke down in Jade’s arms. This kid had a lot of weight and pain on their shoulders. Jade could relate to an extent.

The commotion seemed to attract Jamie and Riley over to the fire. They ended up joining Jade in enveloping Luna in a big group hug.

They stayed like that for a while until Luna pushed back a bit. Everyone got the hint that they wanted some space, so they all backed off and once again sat down around the fire.

Riley sighed. “I think Edmond’s gonna have more important issues to worry about before we get back.”

“Huh?” all three kids inquired in unison.

“I told my friend Eve, you all probably know her as Evelyn, that if she hasn’t heard me in a few days to start raising…” They paused. “Hell… about me being missing. I always make sure if I’m going somewhere to call her and let her know I’m okay so… she’ll know something is up.”

“And how does that relate to Scoutmaster Edmond?” Jamie asked.

“Well… maybe it doesn’t *directly* relate to him but… I’m sure it’ll put pressure on him knowing the flight he paid to have crashed will have a lot of attention on it. I don’t think he accounted for us three joining Luna on that flight.”

Jade hummed. “That doesn’t make sense though. Why wouldn’t he cover up his tracks more?”

“Bing Bong Airlines isn’t frequented by anyone. You pretty much only fly with them if you want a cheap flight. Most people avoid them because of their reputation with flights like… ours.” Riley tapped their chin. “So… my guess is that he was confident that nobody would take that flight so maybe he didn’t care to cover up his tracks better? Or maybe he just didn’t care about being sneaky anyways and just wanted—” Luna whined and wrapped themselves around Riley’s left side. “Sorry Luna. But, uh, yeah.”

That meant, for better or worse, their return would be met with a lot of paparazzi. They didn’t really want all of that attention though. They just wanted to get back to somewhere safe so they could just… live again. They were getting tired of surviving.

“You think he’s gonna be there?”

“Of course. I think with all of the noise though he’ll have a harder time getting away with Luna. And, if he does…”

Jamie pounded a fist into an open hand. “We kick his ass!”

“Uh… maybe not at first but…” Riley threw their hands up in defeat. “Oh, what the hell. If he wants a fight, we’ll give him one.”

“Yessss!”

That seemed to ease Luna’s tensions a bit. For the first time since that conversation started they allowed themselves to giggle and smile. However, nobody expected the bombshell that they dropped next.

“I love you all very much,” Luna very warmly stated. Their smile echoed their tone.

The other three shared stares at each other as a very uncomfortable silence settled in. It seemed that nobody was sure how to respond. After all, they’ve only known each other for a few days, so that felt like such a strange thing to say.

Strange, but not unwelcome.

The minuscule possibility of ever getting a family out of this ragtag troop felt a bit less minuscule. Even then, it still felt a bit… odd… to respond in equal to Luna’s sudden outward affection. Even if it was what Jade wanted after all. Even if…

Jade couldn’t quite find the right words to say. They already knew that anything they did, or didn’t, say would just make things more awkward, so instead they responded in a way that Luna had become quite comfortable with.

Luna seemed to pick up on the silence and almost pulled away in shame, but Jade was quicker than them. They were wrapped in yet another tight hug, but rather than crying, they just giggled and returned it even tighter. Once again, Jamie and Riley joined in to create a ball of warmth and joy.

Jade wanted to shoot their shot. Maybe not so obvious, but enough so everyone would hopefully get the hint.

“So Jamie… you ready to be the middle child?”

“Heck no! You hear about how they get ignored and stuff like that?”

Riley hummed. “Well, you wouldn’t have to worry about that with me.”

Okay so… Riley got the hint and decided to one-up Jade. They couldn’t even be mad, they just had to respect the hustle. They really *were* on the same page after all.

“That… that sounds nice,” Jamie said in such a soft tone. Jade almost confused them for someone else.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, but just like last time, Luna whined a bit when they were ready to be let go.

Everyone complied immediately and settled back into their previous spots. This time though, the silence was very gentle and calming. The tone had been set in a way that everyone was much more comfortable with.

Maybe they could still be a family, after all.

Jade's eyes landed on the third backpack again which reminded them that they wanted to ask about it. "So, uh… who's got this third backpack?"

Jamie was briefly confused by the question. "Huh? Oh, well, we kinda haven't figured that out yet?"

"Then I can take mine back and—"

"No."

"What?"

"*No*," Jamie stated more firmly.

"But—"

"I'm not letting you carry it until you feel better."

Jade sighed. "Okay. Maybe I can carry it again later?"

"You gonna feel better later?"

"Ideally, yes."

"Then sure, you can carry it later."

"I suppose that means Riley will be taking the third one then."

Riley nodded. "Works for me."

"And what about what you found at the statue?"

"Oh! I got a lantern and as usual, some pages." Jamie then picked up the lantern that was sitting beside them. "It doesn't seem super useful but it also feels strangely comforting to hold. Maybe we should just keep it and see?"

Jade shrugged. "If we've got space to carry it, I don't see why not."

Jamie dropped the lantern to their side again and nudged Riley. Riley seemed confused for a moment but then fished out the pages from their coat and handed them to Jade.

This time there were only two pages. They already deducted what one of the pages were from earlier observations, but they still wanted to read the other one. It didn't seem educational like the others, which only supported their theory that this slowly devolved into a journal into Scoutmaster Myres' demise.

*BONUS RULE ?*

*WHERE'D EVERYONE GO?*

There was a depiction of a capybara with a berry on its head in the middle of the page. It didn't really seem fitting given the topic of the page though…

*I had such a wonderful nap, but when I woke up the rest of the troop was gone!*

*I'm sure they're just around the corner. They wouldn't be so foolish as to break Rule 0 just because I needed a little lie-down!*

If only he knew. Such a tragic fate, to be abandoned by the people you entrusted your life in. His obsession with Rule 0 made so much sense now considering he died as a result of others disregarding that.

Riley sighed. "What do you make of this, Jade?"

"I see it as both a look into his eventual demise *and* as a warning. That page he showed you in your nightmare is this one with the red writing, yes?" Riley nodded. "With how obsessed he sounds with Rule 0, I think these pages give us a glance into why he ended up the way he did." Jade then offered the pages to Riley.

Riley took the pages and stuffed them back in their pocket. "Makes sense to me. That'd explain why he's been pretty passive since our first meeting too. We've been sticking really close to each other so he has no reason to bother us."

"Well… let's keep sticking together. I don't want to start finding out now what he'd do if we __"

Riley suddenly yawned, earning an irritated glare from Jade. "I… wait no, I'm not bored of listening to you Jade! I'm just tired is all."

Jade sighed. "That's fair, considering you carried me all the way up here. And, uh, thanks for that, by the way."

"Don't worry about it." Riley glanced over at Luna who yawned on cue. "I suppose this is a good point for us—well, me, Jamie and Luna at least—to get some rest. I'm assuming you're not really tired, but you should try to get some more as well."

"I'll try."

"Great. I'm hitting the hay then. Good night everyone."

"Good night," the kids all said in unison. However, Riley was already asleep by then.

Without skipping a beat, Luna and Jamie quickly laid down to sleep. Luna quickly snuggled into Riley's side while Jamie set up their backpack as a pillow and laid back. They both fell asleep just as quickly as Riley did.

And then they were alone.

Their stomach growled so they decided to creep back over to their umbrella to grab the hot dog waiting for them. Somehow, it felt just as hot as it would've been had it been fresh off the fire. Even more surprising was that it actually *tasted* fresh too. Yet another mystery on this island that would go unanswered…

They hesitantly took one big gulp of the Tryhard Sw—*hydration drink* then screwed the cap back on before they could get any ideas. As much as they wanted to keep drinking, that would've been a terrible idea. Food was plentiful enough that none of them would die of starvation, but *liquid*? That was an entirely different story.

They weren't really tired enough to go to sleep. They didn't really want to just stand around though, so they ended up laying in the same spot they woke up in. They unfolded Riley's coat and rather than just covering up their legs, they ended up curling up into a ball so the coat would cover their entire body.

What Luna said never left their mind. The fact that they'd only known each other for a few days and they started to *love* them like family left Jade feeling conflicted.

On one hand, it's what they really wanted in the end. It'd be hypocritical of them to critique Luna for it. After all, they confided in both Jamie and Riley their feelings about it. On the other hand though…

They suddenly had a revelation: Perhaps things weren't moving too fast given the circumstances.

They'd been placed in a very extraordinary and life-threatening situation. Bonds tended to deepen a lot quicker in those kind of scenarios. So… maybe things were going at the pace they were meant to be.

They liked that a lot more than the alternatives.

It was clear they were destined to be a family. Maybe it was a… weird and disjointed family, but still, a family.

A family that'd actually *love* them and *care* about them, not use them for some kind of benefit or ulterior motive. A family that'd actually want to make lifelong memories with them, not constantly neglect them or ignore their pleas to do *anything*. A family that would… give them hope again.

*Hope for a better future.*

# Chapter 25: The End is in Sight

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Jade had actually fallen down a good string of dreams. Every other night had either been a nightmare they repressed or just… nothing.

These dreams were most certainly fueled by the tender moments they shared with their… friends? Family? They couldn't call them family yet, could they?

Whatever they were, the moments they shared with them gave them hope and in turn, gave them something nice to manifest in their head while they were asleep.

They'd just been drifted away from a pleasant pool party with… the others and now they were all seated at a table. They all held cards, UNO cards to be exact, in their hands. In the middle of the table were two piles of cards haphazardly stacked up. Jade seemed to be losing miserably given they were holding *fifteen cards*, but at the very least, they all seemed to be having *fun*. That's all that mattered.

Strangely, all details beyond the table were just simple shapes and colors. That was alright, all they really cared about was the moment unfolding in front of them.

They just wanted this to stop being a dream and start being their reality. They wanted to share these moments with everyone without having to be asleep for them, without having to wake up sad on a remote island knowing they weren't real.

Suddenly, everything started violently shaking. Strangely, nobody else seemed to react to or be affected by this, but everything still came crashing down regardless. Everything seemed to fracture piece by piece, slowly ripping their dream away from them.

*Why? Why me? Why can't I just—*

Just as they were yanked back into consciousness, the shaking stopped.

The haze that came from waking up alongside the distress they just felt made it difficult to parse anything they could've seen or heard. They opted to just mutter something incomprehensible and try to swat away whoever, or whatever, was trying to disturb them.

They assumed that did the trick since what followed was complete silence and stillness. They had a feeling they were still being watched though.

When they finally opened their eyes, their suspicion was confirmed when they spotted both Jamie and Luna looming over them. While neither of them showed signs of being guilty of shaking them, they deducted based on their personalities and mannerisms that Jamie was likely the culprit.

It didn't really matter *who* did it though, it would've made no difference in their reaction. They were simply confused as to *why* they did it.

“What’s going on? Why’d you have to wake me up like that?” Jade growled.

Jamie stiffened up in response to Jade’s sudden hostility. “I, uh, there’s… something we gotta show you and it’s almost noon I think, so…”

Wait, it’s almost *noon?* “Oh. Sorry, I wasn’t trying to be mean, just…” Jade exhaled deeply. “Nevermind. You two had something to show me?”

Jamie’s face contorted into something… indescribable. “Oh, yeah. There’s a whole field of lava and a volcano ahead of us. It’s… kinda gnarly, honestly.”

Jade shot up immediately. “A what now—” Jamie was correct. There was, in fact, a volcano in front of them. They couldn’t see that aforementioned “field of lava” from where they were sitting, but from just the volcano alone, they knew they were about to be in for a bad time.

“But hey!” Jamie’s sudden chipper tone felt forced. “Look at the top!”

Their eyes drifted to the top, but nothing stood out. It was just the top of a volcano. What was so significant about it?

“The… top? What am I looking for, exactly?”

“Well… me and Riley found out about some ‘peak’ from one of the pages and…” Jamie seemed hesitant to continue.

“And…?”

“Nevermind. Forget it.”

“Okay…?”

“Anyways, looks like that’s where we gotta go.”

“Are you sure?”

“You got any better ideas?”

“Not exactly…” Jade turned around to confirm that the desert was completely shrouded in fog. “Not like we can go back now.”

Jamie ever so slightly winced at that reality. “Yeah. Guess we just gotta move forward then.” They then walked away without giving Jade an opportunity to respond. Luna decided not to follow and instead lingered.

Something that stuck in Jade’s mind was the fact that Jamie seemed quite hesitant about this. Were they already having second thoughts?

Regardless, if *Jamie* of all people was concerned, it had to be bad.

Jade and Luna stared at each other in an awkward silence for a moment. Luna seemed to be incredibly anxious about something, presumably what they saw up ahead, so Jade figured now would be a good time to try to talk to them about it.

“What do you make of this, Luna?”

“It’s scary…”

“Yeah, I’m not terribly excited about it myself, but we don’t really have a choice unfortunately.”

Luna frowned and crept a little closer. “It… s-sounds nice that we can l-leave soon, at least…” They didn’t seem so confident in their statement.

“I suppose that’s true. I imagine everyone’s getting tired of not having air conditioner or food or water or—”

“I don’t w-wanna go back.”

Jade was completely dumbfounded by that statement. “Huh?”

Luna started to tremble. “H-He’s gonna be m-mad—”

“No, hey… buddy, listen.” Jade invited Luna with open arms. Thankfully, Luna complied. “It’ll be okay. Riley already said they’d handle him. Jamie and I are on board to make sure you’re taken care of too.”

“Mmm. Okay…” Still, Luna didn’t seem too confident. Jade wished they could do more for them.

Well… there was one thing. They knew this would be a big commitment to make but…

“Promise.”

Luna pulled away just enough to hold out a pinky. “Pinky promise.”

Jade chuckled. “Okay. Pinky promise.” They then locked pinkies with Luna.

*That* seemed to do the trick, since Luna perked up a little after that. They were still quite anxious, but seemed a little more composed now. Jade would take whatever progress they could get, given the circumstances.

Luna pointed over towards Jamie and Riley, who were now peering over the edge. “M-Maybe you should check it out too…”

“How bad is it?”

Luna’s frown deepened in response. “It’s so s-scary that it even has J-Jamie scared… I…”

That confirmed their suspicions. “Noted. I’ll go take a look. It’s worth knowing what we’re dealing with.”

Jade finally let go of Luna so they could give them some space. They’d been in each other’s personal bubbles a lot lately, so they were probably getting tired of it. They then promptly removed the coat from their lap so they could stand up and head towards Jamie and Riley.

Luna seemed to be trailing behind them with gentle footsteps. For a split second, they figured Luna would be really good at being sneaky. However, given the kind of life they lived, they probably *were* sneaky, but not for good reasons. *Poor kid.*

Riley spotted the two of them immediately, but Jamie seemed to be engrossed by what they were seeing. It wasn’t until Jade tapped them on the shoulder that they responded and nearly jumped out of their skin in the process.

Jamie heaved and grasped at their chest. Had they really scared them that badly? “What the… why… hah… hi Jade… Luna.”

“Hi Jamie, hi Riley. Sorry for scaring you like that.”

“Don’t worry about it.” They then glared over at Riley. “Doesn’t help that *someone* didn’t say anything.”

Riley feigned guilt and threw their hands in the air. “Guilty!” They then giggled, much to Jamie’s dismay.

Jamie groaned. “Whatever. Anyways…” They pointed out in front of them. “This is what we’re dealing with.”

Jade diverted their gaze from Jamie to observe what they were pointing at.

The first thing they noticed was the lava gradually rising around pillars of rock. They noted that it did stagnate at a certain point and recede just as slow as it rose. They had no stopwatch on them so they couldn’t get an exact time, but they did wait until it rose again to determine that they had maybe a few minutes at a time to make their move.

The pillars themselves seemed to loosely form a path through the valley, though very few were actually connected. The ones that were connected were simply connected by a chain. While they were unable to avoid the possibility of jumping and falling into lava, they’d much rather cross with a chain rather than sheer luck.

They spotted a couple nests with massive eggs inside of them. Whether or not those eggs contained food was an entirely different story though. Given they were in nests though… probably not. Regardless, they may still be worth checking out if they end up coming across any.

The last obvious thing was a white suitcase at the very top of a massive pillar. They only spotted the latch and the front of it, but figured it’d be way too far out of their way to go for.

However, that *did* open up the possibility of finding luggage here, which would definitely be a boon given the circumstances.

Jamie sighed. They didn't say anything, but their eyes did the talking for them.

They were *scared*. This was… vastly different and significantly more threatening than anything they'd dealt with already. This wasn't just climbing up a mountain anymore, this was a genuine threat to all of their lives. It was completely reasonable to be afraid of something like this.

"Jamie…?"

"The… the lava. It's not just there for looks, is it?"

Riley shook their head. "No. If you were to fall in there…"

Jamie's eyes contorted into something akin to fear. "I wouldn't come back."

"Yeah."

Jamie softly chuckled. "Maybe Luna's right to be scared about this. This is… this isn't like the other places."

Luna walked up and grabbed Jamie by the hand. "L-Let's just clean up, okay…?"

Jamie nodded. "Yeah. I like that more."

The two of them then headed off to clean up what little they had in the camp, leaving Jade alone with Riley. They almost decided to chase after Jamie to comfort them, but they had a feeling that Luna would be able to do that just as well.

Riley sighed. "No rest for the weary, huh?"

"Is it true that we're getting close to the end? Jamie said we were reaching some 'peak' and was going to say something else, but…"

"Did they tell you that Myres told them we were getting close?"

"No? They kind of trailed off after mentioning that you two had read a page mentioning a 'peak.'" As they stared at the lava, they came to a realization. "Wait… maybe they didn't mention it since Luna was attached to them."

"It's possible. I… still don't know how I'm going to break it to them that half of us are cursed. I'm just not sure how they'd take it."

"Well… neither you nor Jamie seem to be negatively affected so far, so let's just…" They hated that they were saying this, but considering what was in front of them… "Continue to keep this a secret, okay?"

"Yeah, probably for the best. I really don't want to spook them now."

Suddenly, Jamie barreled directly into Riley from behind. Fortunately though, they were both able to quickly re-gain their balance.

Jamie stumbled back and seemed slightly panicked once they realized what they did. “Oops, sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Jamie stared at the ground for a moment. “Are… you?”

“Yup, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Okay. Uh, good.”

Luna approached Riley, which Riley took as an opportunity to remove the hat they claimed and ruffle their hair. Luna seemed to react positively to this affection, much to Riley’s pleasure.

Riley stared at the hat they still held. “Wait… you’ve still got Jade’s hat?”

“Uh… I was g-gonna…” A devious smile crept on their face. “Give it b-back! Obviously!” They definitely weren’t going to. That had to have been Jamie’s idea. That much was confirmed when they smirked.

Was it even Jade’s hat anymore? They’d come to terms with parting ways with it when Luna first claimed it back in the caves. Now, they had no interest in claiming it as theirs again. Luna seemed happier with it, so they didn’t want to ruin that.

Jade shrugged. “You can keep it if you want, I don’t mind.”

Luna seemed taken aback by Jade’s generosity. “W-Wait… really?”

“Yeah. You seem happier with it and it fits you better. I think you should keep it.”

Riley placed the—no, *Luna’s* hat back on their head. They then glanced over at Jade and smiled. Jade responded in kind as a nice and warm feeling filled up their heart.

That moment ended up not lasting for long though, since Riley suddenly seemed concerned about something once they returned their gaze to Luna. “Are you alright, Luna? You seem kinda roughed up.”

Riley’s question prompted Jade to scan Luna for anything wrong. They did notice they were roughened up a bit, but clearly they weren’t injured if they were able to have an interaction like that. They saw nothing readily apparent to be concerned about.

Luna beamed and gave a thumbs-up. “Good! W-We got a little d-distracted and… uh…”

Riley sighed in relief. “That’s alright. At least there’s not much to clean up and you two had some fun in the process.”

The chatter between Luna and Riley became background noise as Jade honed in on Jamie. They'd been focusing a lot on Luna lately, but it was evident that Jamie needed some attention too.

"You okay, Jamie?"

"Yeah. Just a little roughed up from playing with Luna."

"That's not what I meant."

"What do you mean then?"

"You've been acting a bit strange since I woke up. Everything okay?"

Jamie gaze drifted down to their shoes. "Just… thinking about stuff."

"Okay. I won't pry."

Jamie opened up anyways. "Well… every other place we were in seemed… not terrible. Lava is an entirely different thing though, and honestly?" They glanced over at Luna and Riley, then back at Jade. "The stakes are a lot higher for me now. This isn't just about the two of us anymore. It's about *them* too."

"More of a reason to stay cautious, then. If we all want to get out of here and have the opportunity to start anew, we've got to be careful."

"Yeah." Jamie sighed. "Alright. Guess I should actually get to cleaning now…"

"Jamie…"

"You should go sit in the shade for a bit."

"Jamie, I'm—"

"*Please.*" Jade took that as their sign to leave them alone.

"Okay, fine. I'm going."

They quickly darted over to the umbrella before they could agitate Jamie more and set themselves up beneath it. This time, they decided against covering themselves up since it had warmed up considerably since the previous night. Instead, they left Riley's coat alone and made a mental note to hand it to them the next time they passed by.

However, Riley clearly seemed to have no interest in passing by as they darted around camp to assist Jamie and Luna with cleaning. They didn't have much to tend to, but it was evident they were still preoccupied.

Oh well. Maybe they'd come looking for their coat later. Jade would just have to take care of it in the interim.

With nothing else to do, Jade decided to lay back for a bit since nobody would be prodding at them for some time. If they were being given time to rest, they might as well take advantage of it, right?

…

They blinked and the sun was suddenly a little lower in the sky. Immediately after sitting up, they noticed that the entire camp had been tidied. Additionally, they noticed that everyone was standing around the campfire with their bags on their backs, which meant…

*Oh.* They were holding everyone up.

“Sorry for keeping you all—” Jade shouted out from beneath the umbrella.

Jamie cut them off. “Jade, please, just stop apologizing for taking care of yourself already.”

“But—”

“Just… get everything packed up so we can go, okay?”

Jade nodded. “Okay.”

They then promptly disassembled their entire set up, starting with the umbrella. They pulled it out of the ground and closed it up then tossed it to the side. They then stared at everything else which was already organized, unsure of what to do next.

“I’m guessing you’re gonna need this?”

Jade turned around to Jamie offering their backpack. Jade reached out to grab it, but Jamie pulled it back out of their reach. “Make sure you give it back to me when you’re done, ‘kay?”

“Of course.”

Jamie once again offered the backpack to Jade, who grabbed it and set it down gently beside their items.

They stared at Riley’s coat for a moment before deciding to just stuff it in the bottom around the base of the golden Bing Bong. If Riley needed it that badly, they would’ve already asked, right? The umbrella was next to be stored, occupying one of the outside slots. The bottle of Tryhard Sweat was placed snugly in the other.

Satisfied with their work, they picked up the backpack and handed it back to Jamie, who quickly slid it on their back before Jade could get any ideas.

“Hey, uh…” Riley waved for everyone to return to the fire, which they did. “Before we get going, I just wanna say thanks. You’ve all been incredible to be around and I’m glad we’ve made it this far. We’ve just got a little bit left to go before we can get off of this island so… I just wanted to get that out there before I lost the chance to.”

Jamie frowned. “You act like we’re never gonna see each other again.”

“No, I act like we’re about to walk through the literal pits of hell *and* a volcano. I don’t think we’ll be offered the chance to speak like this for a while.”

“I guess that’s true.” Jamie then dug a small hole in the sand with their foot for a moment. “Uh, thanks to you too, I guess. You’re… I like you. And, uh, Luna too.” They seemed a bit ashamed to make such comments.

Luna seemed giddy by the sudden comment and nearly tackled Jamie in a hug as a result. Surprisingly, Jamie didn’t resist and instead embraced Luna. “Especially you, Luna. You’re awesome.”

Little did Luna know, that was probably the highest honor they could receive in Jamie’s eyes. Jamie wasn’t exactly an “I love you” kid or anything of that nature. At least, not saying it directly. If they held someone in that regard though… it was basically the same thing.

“Yay! Y-You’re awesome too, Jamie!”

Jamie simply laughed and tightened their embrace in response. Jade could’ve sworn they saw a tear in their eyes, but they’d likely never admit to it. They then let go of Luna and gently pushed them back a bit. “Alright, that’s enough hugs for a while. I feel better now.”

Surprisingly, Luna didn’t seem upset at this. In fact, they instead nodded in agreement. Maybe they were getting tired of all of the affection too. After all…

Nevermind. They didn’t want to go down that train of thought. They knew how it’d go anyways.

Jamie stuck an arm out in front of them. “Peak Scouts on three?”

Jade raised an eyebrow. “Peak Scouts?”

“Yeah! We’re climbing to the peak, and we’re scouts, so… maybe we can be called Peak Scouts?”

Riley stuck out their arm, placing their hand atop Jamie’s. “Sounds good to me.”

Luna hummed in agreement and put their hand atop the pile as well.

Jade volunteered their hand as well. Jamie started the countdown shortly after.

It was nice that their troop finally had a name. Maybe it was silly in wake of all of the other issues they were dealing with, but it did ground them a little bit. At least everyone was on board with it. It would’ve probably been awkward if they weren’t.

“One…”

It just felt so surreal to be at this point. They were, hopefully, not too far away from going home.

“Two…”

It was strange how close they'd all gotten, especially when they were a dysfunctional group a few days ago.

"Three!"

The past didn't matter now though. All that mattered was the present and the future.

"PEAK SCOUTS!" They all shouted in unison.

They all departed from the camp for hopefully the last time. All that stood between them and their salvation was a volcano.

Nothing stopped them before.

*Nothing was going to stop them now.*

# Chapter 26: Field of Lava and Flames

Chapter Notes

Time for the orange baby Luna to shine! (switching to their POV)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In spite of what lied ahead and consequently, *who* lied ahead after that, Luna actually felt pretty good about the predicament they were in.

Yes, they did have to walk through a field covered in lava and hot rocks, and yes, they did have to eventually deal with their… “caretaker,” but they still managed to lift their spirit after spending some time with their friends.

They weren’t really afraid of Edmond anymore now that they had their wonderful friends to back them up. They’d be foolish to deny they were still *nervous*, but any sense of fear they felt for him had long since disappeared.

Their feelings towards Edmond actually mirrored their feelings towards the trek onward as well. While they were certainly still nervous about having to walk across the field and into a volcano, they weren’t scared anymore.

They couldn’t quite shake the feeling that things would go wrong somewhere though. Whether one of them fell into lava, or Edmond would somehow sabotage their happy ending…

Well, it kept their confidence in check.

They didn’t even want to begin to imagine how angry he would be to see them walking back into the airport *alive* and with new friends. He did try to kill them after all, so they imagined it wouldn’t be a heartfelt reunion.

They recalled when both Jamie and Riley said they’d beat up Edmond if it came to it. While it did humor them at the time, they weren’t entirely certain if those two would stick to their word. They didn’t necessarily *doubt* that they’d actually do it but… would it even be a good idea? It’d only attract attention and they didn’t really want that. Maybe they could resolve this peacefully instead?

However, if what Riley said was true and that Ms. Evelyn would actually make a scene about them being missing, then hopefully Edmond wouldn’t be there at all.

Luna couldn’t help but crack a smile. They were surrounded by such wonderful people and—

*Nobody will ever love you, #&@*$*

That wasn't right. They had at least *three* people that loved them—at least, they think so—so that had to be wrong!

Also… why did that voice sound so much like Edmond's? It had his deep growl and all. That sounded way too close to the real deal, sending shivers down their spine. It said something at the end too… maybe a name? Whose name, though? It couldn't have been theirs, right?

They sighed and pulled themselves out of their head. They had far more important issues to worry about than spiraling into an endless stream of questions. It wasn't like they were going to get answers anyways.

With their attention re-focused on their surroundings, they noticed everyone had stopped at the plateau once again. Confused, they stepped out from behind the group and joined the others near the edge. When they looked down, they immediately figured why they weren't making progress.

Somehow, they missed it before, but they noticed that the way down was far too steep to simply walk down. To make matters worse, the drop was significantly higher than the others, meaning they couldn't just jump or roll down and be fine.

They weren't really afraid of heights, but they still felt uneasy looking down from the top. They'd been in pretty high places in the past, mostly to evade catching any attention, but—

*Nobody would miss you if you jumped.*

Luna gasped and quickly jumped back from the edge. That voice's sudden interjection scared any curiosity and interest out of them.

They resigned themselves to their previous position behind the group. The others probably didn't need their help anyways since Jamie was good at figuring out where to go.

Speaking of Jamie, it seemed that they were staring directly at Luna. They didn't say anything, but it was obvious they noticed something was up. Luna tried to feign innocence with a smile, but it was clear that Jamie didn't buy it. Instead of pursuing the matter any further though, they shook their head and returned to scouting out a route.

Jamie sighed. "Looks like we're just gonna have to scale down the wall, I'm not really seeing anything that stands out."

"Well… at least going down is easier than going up, right?" Riley inquired.

"Yeah, I suppose that's true. Just 'cuz it's easier though doesn't mean we should be reckless."

"Of course. I know that."

Luna had to agree with Riley. Going down was easier, and truthfully less scarier, than going up. It took far less energy to do and they did have the reassurance of their friends waiting. Well, assuming they weren't forced to go first. Nobody would let them do that, though.

“Jade? Luna? You two cool with that as well?” Jamie asked.

Jade hummed and Luna gave a thumbs-up. Jamie stared at Luna for a little too long, which made them uncomfortable, but they ended up disappearing beneath the cliff not long after.

“Hey, uh, one of you two go next. I’ll stay for now to make sure you two get down without issues. I’m assuming Jamie will do the same at the bottom.” Riley then gestured towards the edge.

Luna and Jade stared at each other for a moment, then Jade silently decided they’d go next. Luna was grateful for this, because it meant that there would be an extra person below to catch them and ensure their safety.

Luna crept up to the edge once more—and really hoped that thought wouldn’t come back—and peered over it. Thankfully, they did spot both Jamie and Jade near the bottom. Though, now that they saw them down there, they realized it was much more of a descent than they initially thought.

It didn’t really change how they felt, but it did highlight the importance of being careful. One wrong move at that height would certainly…

No, it wasn’t worth thinking about the “what-ifs.” They wouldn’t fall. They’ve done this stuff in far worse conditions, especially when they were weaker and more timid a few days ago. They’d be okay. Besides, they had people both above and below them, so they had no reason to worry.

They eased themselves down from the edge of the cliff and began their descent. As expected, going down was far easier than going up, which was good since they didn’t want to be stuck to the wall for long. They felt uneasy being that high up, so the sooner they made it to the bottom, the better.

Once they made considerable progress, they heard Jamie beckon to them from below. “Hey, you two! You’re getting close. Just keep going and we can take a break once you’re down here.”

Luna cautiously turned their head down a little bit and thankfully, Jamie was correct! Beneath them was a massive platform which was considerably closer to the field of lava. Both Jade and Jamie stood in their line of sight and waved.

It seemed like the perfect place to rest as they figured out what to do next. Furthermore, there was a much more gradual slope beyond the platform leading down into the field, meaning they’d likely have an easier time making that final push.

They quickly scaled down the remainder of the wall—

*It’d be a shame if you fell and broke your leg.*

—and dropped off of it once they were at a safe height to do so.

While they weren't really tired physically, the sudden debut of the voice today was really getting to them mentally. It was saying a lot of mean things to them and it sounded like Edmond and they just didn't understand any of it.

They ended up just standing beside Jamie. They weren't sure *why*, but just being around them made them feel a little more ease. They wouldn't have been able to explain if asked, so they were hoping that Jamie wouldn't mind.

Riley laughed between ragged breaths. "Never… thought you'd get tired, Jamie…" Just like Luna, they reached the ground and dropped from the wall. Almost immediately after their feet landed, they flopped down and leaned against the wall.

Jamie scoffed. "Look whose talking. And, uh, no, I'm not tired. My hands are just getting kinda sore from scaling down so much of this wall. Besides… it's probably a good idea to take a break before we take on… this."

Jade suddenly walked by, much to the confusion of both Luna and Jamie, and stared at something far out in the distance. "Hey, uh… any of you see what I'm seeing?"

The other three invited themselves to the edge of the platform to observe what Jade spotted. Luna stared very intently up ahead, but all they saw was the—nope, nevermind, they did see something. It was very hard to make out, but they could've sworn they saw the silhouette of what appeared to be some kind of structure.

Jamie sighed in defeat. "Other than the volcano? Nope." Riley echoed this sentiment.

"I… I t-think I see it…?" Luna stated hesitantly. They weren't really confident in their assessment.

"Whatever it is, it's some kind of structure. It might be worth checking out."

Jamie shrugged. "Well, it *is* on the way to the volcano, so… I guess it wouldn't hurt to look out for it."

"Yeah, agreed," Riley said. "I'm good to go by the way, so…"

"Cool. Let's get going then. Jade? Luna?"

Once again, the aforementioned kids responded in an eerily similar manner as they did to Jamie's question back at camp. Jamie seemed to be quite disturbed by this. Luna, on the other hand, felt quite humored by it.

"Weirdos," Jamie grumbled under their breath. They failed to hide the smile that crept on their face.

*Why won't you just—*

***No.*** *I'm not doing any of that! Leave me alone!*

Jamie nudged Luna in the side. “Keep spacing out like that and I won’t be the only one to notice,” they muttered.

“Sorry.”

“Stop saying that.”

“So—uh, okay…”

Jamie then pulled Luna along to catch up with Riley and Jade, who had gone down the slope a bit. Fortunately, both of them were too preoccupied to notice that Luna wasn’t present.

They didn’t mind. They’d grown used to being ignored and truthfully, they preferred it over being constantly on edge or bullied simply for existing. The solitude also gave them ample opportunities to plot out how they were getting food for the day and it kept people out of their business.

They didn’t get that kind of solitude around their new friends. They never ended up complaining about it, and by this point, they were glad they didn’t. They felt safe and happy enough around them that they didn’t feel the need to run off and fend for themselves anymore.

Which is why it would just hurt them that much more when they were forced to part ways. Allowing themselves to be more vulnerable around people they trust just to be ripped away by someone so cruel…

They didn’t get much more time to dwell on that though since the gradual shift in heat came to the forefront of their mind. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise given where they were, but it wasn’t a very welcome change. They were getting tired of the heat after dealing with it in the desert.

They ended up stopping near the middle of the slope since the lava had begun to rise. It soon rose to the point where any paths were closed off from them, at least temporarily. They felt incredibly uncomfortable given their proximity, though they couldn’t tell if that was due to the sudden surge in heat or their anxiety rising. It was probably a combination of the two.

After a few minutes, the lava gradually sank back in the ground. *How* it did that, they didn’t know. What they did know was that they had to get moving again. They could worry about something like that when they were in a safer location.

“Looks like this is our time to move.” Jamie used their free hand to point at a relatively short pillar in the middle of the field. It was connected to a much larger rock formation by just a chain. “If we can get over there, I saw a chain that’d help us get across to…” They traced their finger along the chain until it reached the bigger pillar. “That hunk of rock over there. Seems like it’d be a good vantage point.”

Luna stared down at the ground where the lava once was. It didn’t seem to leave any trace, but they imagined that it at least had to be hot to the touch. “B-But… won’t the ground be hot…?”

“Probably, which is why…” Jamie groaned. “Look, just trust me, okay? We don’t have time to sit here and whine.”

Luna swallowed a lump in their throat. They were not a fan of that response. “Right… okay…”

“Alright, let’s get over there then!” Again, Jamie yanked Luna along, forcing them to run to keep up.

Just as expected, the ground heated up as they got closer to the pillar. They tried their hardest to fight every urge in their body to just run back and cower in fear. They’ve come too far to start being a coward now. They didn’t want to disappoint their friends or—

*They’re already disappointed in you.*

If not for the fact they were bound to Jamie, they would’ve just run up ahead. Instead, they tightly squeezed Jamie’s hand. They really hoped they’d get the memo and get a move on.

“Ow, jeez—” They slowed down to try to figure out Luna’s deal, but hissed when they felt the heat on their feet. “Alright, we’ll pick up the pace.”

Even ignoring the introduction of this rude voice, it was probably for the best that this happened anyways. Luna noticed the lava starting to creep back up from the ground, so they likely could use that as an excuse rather than opening up about the voice.

Jamie was the first to climb up the pillar. It seemed that they understood the urgency, considering they made direct eye contact with the lava, so they took no time in checking for a safe spot. Instead, they quickly scrambled up to the top. Nothing crumbled beneath their weight on their way up, and they gave a thumbs-up at the top, so Luna made themselves the next person to go up.

Everyone else followed Jamie’s path and found similar success in their ascent. Once they made it to the top, Luna separated themselves from everyone as much as they could. They weren’t very successful though, since they didn’t have much available space. Maybe they’d get some time to be alone later.

Jamie walked over to where the chain was and stared at it for a moment. They then looked past it and down at the lava.

Jade was bewildered, to say the least. “With the lava still as high as it is?”

Jamie frowned. “Do you… have a better idea?”

“No…” Jade once again observed the gap between the chain and the lava. “Alright, I trust your judgment here.”

“I appreciate it.” Jamie softly smiled, though it quickly disappeared. “Let’s get going then. We’ll have plenty of time to rest and figure out what to do next when we’re a bit higher.”

Jamie grabbed onto the chain and started to climb. They made it about halfway across before looking back. They removed one of their hands from the chain to give a thumbs-up, leaving them dangling by one arm. They had pulled a similar move back in the forest, and like last time, everyone was terrified by the sight.

“Jamie…” Jade growled.

“Jeez, okay!” Jamie returned their other hand to the chain. “I’m going…”

Jade decided to go next shortly after Jamie resumed climbing. Unlike Jamie, however, they didn’t stop to show off. Instead, they crossed the entirety of the chain and never looked down or back until they made it safely to the other end.

Jade and Jamie making it across safely bolstered Luna’s confident just enough to convince them to do it. However, their confidence almost completely faded when they stepped up and saw that the lava had not budged.

Those two making it across should’ve instilled confidence in them that they’d be perfectly fine, but in wake of that mysterious voice, all sorts of bad thoughts swirled in their head. What if the chain randomly snapped? What if their hands slipped? What if—

*You should try it and—*

They decided they were just going to try to ignore the voice. It wasn’t a productive use of their time to listen to something that was constantly feeding them lies. They’ve had a few days to realize they’re worth more than that, so they weren’t falling for it anymore.

“I know it’s scary, but I promise you’ll be safe!” Jade called out to them. It seemed that they had once again drawn attention to themselves. Thankfully though, their hesitance had been confused for being afraid of the lava.

It seemed they weren’t getting out of this, so they sighed and grabbed onto the chain. Rather than looking down, they instead stared directly at Jamie. Maybe if they focused on them rather than the lava, it’d be much easier to do this.

They then hastily climbed across the chain to the other side. The chain was surprisingly stable, though at the same time, they weren’t really the heaviest kid around. They could feel the heat from the lava below them, but they didn’t allow it to stop them in their tracks. The sooner they were done with this, the better.

Once they were above stable ground again, they dropped down from the chain gracefully. They sighed in relief while Jamie softly clapped for them.

“I… don’t have a good feeling about this,” Riley said.

“And… you didn’t bother to say anything until *after* the three of us went across?” Jamie questioned. “What’s the problem anyway?”

Riley stared at Jamie for a moment then sighed. “I’m a lot heavier than you three. I’m not certain if it’ll hold me.”

“It’s a *chain*, of course it’ll hold you! I mean, you didn’t have that concern when climbing up rocks and vines, did you?”

Riley hummed. “Yeah, I guess so. Just overthinking it, I suppose.”

Jamie suddenly seemed a bit more empathetic. “Nah, you’re right. This is a lot more sketchy than the other stuff… we can come back if—”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll make my way over now.”

Riley grabbed onto the chain and let it bear their weight. They cringed as it groaned. However, neither it, nor the pillars supporting the chain, showed any signs of breaking so they continued.

However, once they moved forward about a foot, the chain suddenly snapped under their weight. The shorter half simply dangled from the wall while the longer half slammed into the pillar the children were on, shattering the chain immediately.

Luna’s stomach dropped instantly. The one thing that was supposed to keep Riley safe, and had kept the others safe, was now gone. The one adult in their life that actually cared about them was now stranded with no way across. It wasn’t fair! Why them? Why not—

“That’s… not good,” Riley stated.

“Damn it…” Jamie muttered under their breath. “Now what?!” They called out.

“I’m just gonna have to wait for this lava to recede so I can walk across. I don’t really like it, but I don’t exactly have a choice anymore.”

As if on cue, the lava began to recede. Luna wasn’t really on board with Riley’s new idea, so they almost wanted to scout for another way around for them. Before they could though, Riley started descending at the same pace as the lava. It seemed they were that determined to make it across after all.

“Hey, wait a sec!” Jamie called out. They then dug in their backpack and fished out the white lantern they got at camp. “Remember this? It felt pretty good to hold… so maybe it’ll help you out…?” They seemed uncertain of themselves.

Riley seemed confused for a moment, but then shrugged. “I don’t really see how a *lantern* would help when it’s this hot, but sure, I’ll bite.” They then held out their hands to ready themselves to catch it.

“Alright, here it comes!” Jamie then threw the lantern just hard enough so it’d land in Riley’s hands.

The lantern seemed to ignite itself from all of the motion, revealing a beautiful green ball of light in the middle of it. It seemed to wrap Riley in a very faint green aura, slowly scrubbing away at some of their wounds. Maybe there really was something special with that lantern after all!

“Huh. I guess it *does* do something,” Riley gawked. They stared at it for a little while before suddenly remembering what they were doing. “Oh, right. I’m gonna make a run for it with this lantern!”

“Okay, well, make it quick! The lava’s not gonna wait on you to take your precious time!”

Riley rolled their eyes and finished making their descent down to the base of the pillar. However, before they could do that, the pit separating them and the children suddenly lit up.

Everyone stared at the light for a moment, unsure of what to do. That moment was enough for a pillar of flame to bellow from it, completely obscuring Riley from everyone’s vision.

And in that same moment, any hopes and dreams that Luna had went up in flames as well.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Apparently, the title in my master doc is this while the title it suggests to me (which I think is the AO3 title) has "Despair" instead of "Flames." Congrats, this title is an FFL (can I call it that) exclusive now.

# Chapter 27: It's Time to Leave

Luna wasn’t sure how everyone else felt as they stared at the fire, but what they were sure of was that they were *horrified*. The one adult in their life that hadn’t hurt or outright neglected them was the one to go up in flames, and they just didn’t know how to feel about that.

It wasn’t fair. Why couldn’t Edmond have been the one to—no, that’s not right. They didn’t want him to die. They just didn’t want him to hurt them anymore. What a weird thought to have, especially now.

Riley was their one chance at salvation. Now, they’d have to face Edmond *alone*, and who knew what would happen to them after that? That possibility had always scared them, but they’d been confident that it wouldn’t occur now that they had their friends with them.

However, they didn’t have Riley anymore. Riley was down there burning. Riley was gone and so too was their hope of a better life. They had to accept that. They wished they could’ve at least given them a proper burial though.

They dropped to their knees and just stared at the fire. As much as they wanted to ball up and cry, they just *couldn’t*. Their lack of feeling wasn’t from a lack of love, but they just didn’t know how to process the sudden shift in everything. One moment, everything was fine; the next moment, it felt as if they had lost everything.

Someone had dropped down beside them and wrapped an arm around them. They didn’t really know, nor care, who it was. It wouldn’t have changed anything. It wouldn’t have changed how they felt. It wouldn’t have changed the almost certain outcome they’d have to face soon. It wouldn’t have—

The pillar disappeared just as quickly as it appeared, like it hadn’t just claimed a life.

They fully expected to see nothing but maybe a remnant proving that Riley was once there. What they saw instead was Riley still alive.

Wait, *alive*?!

Though their eyes were closed, Luna could tell by the fact they had a death grip on the lantern that they were alive. Their status was only supported by the fact that they were trembling in fear, which was definitely something that could only be felt while alive.

“Holy sh—crap…” Jamie muttered. Surprisingly, Jade didn’t chastise them this time.

Once Riley opened their eyes and caught sight of the children, they immediately dropped the lantern and crossed the pit while it was “safe.” They then presumably grabbed onto the pillar and started climbing, but Luna failed to get a good angle to confirm.

Following Riley’s near-death, a lot more negative thoughts crept into Luna’s mind with the former once again out of sight. What if they ended up slipping and hitting their head or

maybe they miscalculated a climb and fell into lava or…

Well, at least none of those thoughts would be a reality, since both of Riley's hands soon appeared and clasped the edge. Everyone stayed back just enough so they'd have space to pull themselves up, but close enough to catch them if something went awry.

They peeked up over the edge but stopped for a moment to quickly scan everyone. In that time, Luna noticed that their breath had become quick and jagged, which was not really ideal given the circumstances. However, they assumed that any attempts at remedying that would just not be effective at the moment.

Once Riley caught a glance at everyone again, they finished climbing up and threw themselves on the ground. They didn't say anything, instead opting to curl up into a ball and muttering to themselves.

Almost immediately, both Jamie and Luna attempted to swarm Riley. However, Jade stopped both of them in their tracks. "I… don't think that's a good idea right now. Just give them some space to breathe."

That advice completely went against how Luna would've approached the situation, but they weren't exactly in the mood to argue over it either. They were too tired from the rollercoaster of emotions to take any interest in an argument.

Jamie, on the other hand, seemed to back off immediately. They gave Jade an understanding nod and swiftly relocated to the other end of the platform. Luna only caught a quick glance of their face as they did so, but they seemed a bit… upset?

Since Luna wouldn't get anywhere hovering over Riley, they decided to follow Jamie to their spot. It seemed they needed someone too and the two of them could also get some scouting done while Jade tended to Riley.

"Oh, hey Luna," Jamie sighed.

"Jamie…?"

Luna sat down beside Jamie and folded their hands in their lap. They did see that Jamie left a stray hand near for the taking, but they didn't want to push their luck.

Though… Jamie kept creeping their hand a little bit closer. Did they want it to be held?

Then it suddenly hit them: Jamie was looking for comfort. Luna grabbed their hand immediately upon making that realization.

That seemed to prompt Jamie to continue. "I, uh… if it wasn't for that lantern…"

"It's… not w-worth thinking about w-what could've happened… t-they're alive so…"
*Hypocrite.*

"Yeah, I guess so." Jamie grimaced as a random pillar of fire bellowed elsewhere, then sighed. "We can't stay here much longer. We've gotta get to whatever that is…" They then

pointed over towards that structure. “We can probably actually rest there.”

Luna hummed in agreement. That was probably for the best considering one them almost lost their life here. The quicker they could escape this nightmare, the better.

*You think **this** is a nightmare? Wait until I get my hands on you!*

They subconsciously gripped Jamie’s hand tighter, prompting a concerned glare from them.

“Okay, your turn.”

“M-My turn?”

“Yeah. You’ve been acting weird since we left camp. What’s up with that?”

“It’s…” *Don’t you dare. They already know too much.* “Nothing.”

“You—” Another pillar of fire erupted much closer, scaring both of them. Jamie sighed. “Fine. I can’t make you talk to me. We should probably get going again anyways.”

Jamie swiftly got up and tucked their hands into their pockets. They seemed to have a mix of annoyance and betrayal on their face and their body language seemed to support this.

Was that not the right thing to say…?

*It was, you—*

“Hey, you two doing okay over there?” Jamie beckoned to Jade and Riley.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little shaken up, but fine,” Riley responded.

“’kay. I think we’ll have a better chance to coddle you or whatever when we’re out of here. We can’t stay here much longer.”

“Right… the fire,” Riley sighed. “And, I’m *fine*, seriously. That was abit too scary for my liking but… I’m fine.”

“If you say so. Lemme figure out where we’re going and we’ll head out.”

Rather than paying any attention to that voice, Luna decided they’d contribute to scouting. They’d be far more useful, and have less suspicion on them, if they could help their friends instead of moping around and zoning out.

Almost immediately, they saw another tall pillar close-by. Thankfully, this one could likely be crossed simply by jumping, so the possibility of anyone being cut off was minimal. From there, they saw a large flat platform a little further away which seemed to stretch out until it was quite close to the structure.

How convenient. An easy way out of here! They definitely needed to tell their friends about it!

“W-What about… this way, Jamie?” They then pointed towards the same path they found.

Jamie stared at the path for a moment before responding. “Huh. That’s… actually really easy, I think. Probably gonna need to actually walk over there to make sure but it gets us way closer.” They patted Luna on the head. “Good job, Luna!”

Luna felt a lot better after getting that praise from Jamie. It also seemed to lift a heavy burden off of their shoulders, which—

*You freak! You’d side with them over—*

Maybe that’s what the heavy burden was. Was a little praise all it really took to get them to stop giving that voice space in their head?

Well, no. Realistically, it was spending enough time with nice people to make them realize they were better than what he told them they were. The praise just happened to be enough to push that voice out of their head.

Luna took the hand that Jamie had offered, with a much gentler grip this time, and then swiftly departed for the path they found.

Thankfully, it was as simple to cross as it seemed, as they very quickly ended up at large platform. Even better, it ended up leading almost right up to the base of the structure. They did have to clear a small jump to get to a smaller platform jutting out from the wall, but it seemed simple enough.

After clearing the jump to the next platform, they had reached the base of the structure. All that stood between them and the top now were the three levels of walls they’d need to scale. Thankfully, the wall had plenty of stones sticking out of it to guide them up. Hopefully the others would treat them as nicely.

Riley followed the protruded rocks to a tee which allowed them to effortlessly scale the wall. Once at the top, they scoffed. “Man, if only the rest of the mountain made it this easy.”

“If only you didn’t suck at climbing,” Jamie grumbled.

Riley raised an eyebrow. “What was that?”

“Nothing!” Jamie then scrambled up the same path that Riley took.

It wasn’t until Luna started climbing the wall themselves that they fully realized what Riley was talking about. The stones that stuck out from the wall really did make it a lot easier, giving them something to both grab and stand on. Had they had something like that from the start, maybe they would’ve already been off of this island.

Though… given the time they’ve been able to spend strengthening their relationship with their friends, maybe leaving quicker wouldn’t have been a good idea. They almost certainly would’ve ended up going back “home” with Edmond in that case.

They scaled the second and third walls just as easily, which made Luna increasingly suspicious about what was at the top.

There had to be a catch to this. Nothing was ever this easy without a catch. Every time they saw some food just sitting out, there was always someone close-by to run them off. They knew better than to believe this wasn't rigged.

Once they made it to the top, they couldn't believe what they saw.

There was that weird stone statue again sitting near the middle of the platform, but what really drew their attention was the abundance of luggage surrounding it. It all just seemed too good to be true though. The luggage had to be rigged with poison or maybe the statue would explode if it was tampered with…

That possibility didn't seem to bother Jamie though, since they immediately charged towards the statue. Riley, on the other hand, started looting all of the luggage. It seemed that Jade was the only other person that was skeptical about this since they stayed back with Luna.

However, when they noticed nothing had happened with Jamie and Riley tampering with everything, they decided it was safe enough take part in checking everything out. Not "be reckless" safe enough but… safe enough.

They walked up to the lone suitcase that hadn't been opened. It was bright orange and larger than the others. Since it stood out so much, it just had to have something nice in it, right…?

Or it could be—

*None of these are trapped, Luna.…*

Okay, so that was their own voice that time. Good. They were starting to miss their own internal monologue.

They hesitantly grabbed each of the latches holding the suitcase shut, still uncertain of what would be inside. Once they removed the latches from their place, all that was holding it shut were their hands. They let go and immediately jumped back as it swung open.

They returned to the suitcase and peered inside. What they found inside was not a trap, but a rescue claw! It was red and gray and… had a claw on it. They remembered seeing one of those while working on their First Aid badge, but never really got the chance to mess with it. Something about accidentally hurting themselves or breaking something, but also…

They glanced over at the others, but they were all preoccupied. Riley was observing the statue, while Jamie was bragging to Jade about what they found.

Well, nobody was stopping them from grabbing it now so, that's exactly what they did. It felt weird to be holding something like that, and they'd definitely need some practice, but they did recall hearing that it only had three charges so they wouldn't really get to.

They didn't feel entirely comfortable being in possession of it anymore. They didn't really want that responsibility when they barely knew how to use the thing. Patching people up was

more up their alley.

A question then entered their mind: who would they give this rescue claw to?

Well, maybe it'd be Jamie, since they were headed in Luna's direction with their eyes fixated on the rescue claw.

"Woah! What's that you got there Luna? Looks sick!"

Luna was taken aback by Jamie's enthusiasm, but they realized they could use this as an opportunity to teach them. To be… useful.

"I-It's a rescue claw! Y-You, uh… point it at someone, s-shoot it and… t-they'll be dragged to you!"

Jamie seemed impressed by the explanation. "Oh, well, I guess that makes sense given it's a 'rescue' claw and all that… anything else?"

"Well… y-you only get three uses with it and…"

"And…?"

"Y-You *can* use it to g-go up faster but y-you'd be leaving everyone b-behind…"

"So, use this thing only to rescue people then, got it. Using it to go up sounds kinda sick though… but yeah, I get it. Not a good idea to leave anyone behind."

"It seems k-kinda risky anyways so… p-probably not a good idea."

"So, uh—"

"Do you w-want it? Oh, uh… sorry."

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "You… don't want it?"

"W-Well! It's not that I don't, but… I d-don't trust myself with it…"

"And you trust me with it more?"

"…Yes?"

Luna then held out the rescue claw for Jamie to grab. Jamie stared it for a minute then grabbed it. They then aimed it somewhere random as if they were going to use it. While Luna felt uneasy that Jamie was just playing with it, they did at least aim it away from everyone else.

"Sweet, thanks. I'll make sure to use this if it's needed," Jamie said as they tossed their backpack on the ground. "I… uh, don't have anywhere to put it. This stupid golden statue…"

"I can carry it for you if you'd like," Riley offered.

“Sure, I don’t want it anyways. I’m more interested in this thing.” They then motioned towards the rescue claw by their side.

“It’s not a toy, Jamie…”

“I know, jeez!”

“Okay. I’ll go ahead and take the statue off of your hands then.”

Riley then took the statue from Jamie’s backpack and put it in an open spot in their own. They grunted a bit at the sudden increase in weight but otherwise slung it back on their back with no issue.

Jamie then shoved the rescue claw into their bag where the golden statue once resided. They put their backpack back on as well and seemed quite content with not having that burden on their shoulders anymore.

“Oh, by the way Luna, where’d you learn about that claw at?”

“I, uh, l-learned it with my First Aid badge!” Luna beamed in pride.

“Huh. I…” Jamie suddenly seemed a bit tense…? “Wasn’t there—”

Jade butted in. “What they really meant to say was that they weren’t paying attention and failed to get the badge.”

“I will strangle you,” Jamie threatened through gritted teeth.

Jade laughed. “I’m sure you will.”

“T-That’s okay! You’ll always g-get another chance!” Luna reassured, but then it dawned on them that they gave the claw to someone with *less* knowledge and experience. Oh well, Jamie would probably figure it out anyways.

“Hmm… nah. I’d rather just leave this first aid stuff to you instead.”

“Hey, uh, I don’t mean to interrupt but… I got another lantern from that statue,” Riley interjected. They were, in fact, holding another one of those white lanterns.

“Anything that’s actually interesting?”

“Nope. I guess that was it,” Riley replied. “Wait… the thing that saved me from getting killed isn’t *interesting* to you?”

“Uh… forget I said anything about it.”

Luna then looked around at all of the luggage which seemed to be looted. “W-Wait… what did y-you and Riley get from the other luggage?”

Jamie grunted in discontent. “Just a bunch of rope and some trail mix.”

“I mean… t-that’s still useful, r-right…?”

Jamie shrugged. “Better than nothing, I guess.”

“That’s more like it!” Luna beamed.

With the statue and all of the luggage looted, that just left them with… the volcano.

“Well, with all that done, I think we should get going into the volcano,” Jamie said. “The sooner we get outta here, the better.”

“What about… camp?” Luna then yawned and suddenly felt a little more fatigued.

“Do you see a camp around here? The closest thing to a ‘camp’ is what I think is a campfire in the entrance to the volcano, but do you *really* wanna sleep inside a volcano?”

As much as Luna wanted to object, they learned a long time ago to keep their mouth shut. Speaking out either got them an earful or a hand to the mouth so instead of objecting, they instead smiled and shook their head.

Sleeping in a volcano didn’t really sound like a good time anyways. Who knew what would happen if it decided to erupt? Maybe it was better to just keep moving even if they were starting to get tired. They weren’t going to be truly safe again until they’ve made it to the top.

Jamie stared at Luna for a little while longer then sighed. “You’re tired, I know. We all are. I just don’t think it’s a good idea to sleep in there.”

Riley nodded. “Agreed. It’s probably for the best if we just get moving. I’m sure we’ll have time to rest when we make it to the top.”

Everyone grumbled in agreement then set off towards what would hopefully be both their final challenge and their salvation.

Luna was *still* waiting for the catch though.

# Chapter 28: The Belly of the Beast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a little bit of time standing around the fire and enjoying what would most likely be their last treat for a while, everyone stood close to the fog wall in anticipation of what would be inside. Luna was still a bit upset that they couldn't get proper rest, but again, they learned to keep their mouth shut a long time ago.

They never actually saw the inside of a volcano before, but if it was anything like what they'd just gone through, they assumed they were about to be in for a bad time.

They could only hope that their lack of sleep as well as whatever was inside wouldn't get in their way of escaping. The last thing they needed was more problems.

After a few minutes, the fog slowly dissipated, revealing the inside of the volcano. From where they stood, it seemed mostly innocuous: just some more rocks and platforms to climb. What really caught their interest though was the ground up ahead seemingly being illuminated. They weren't really sure why that was the case, but they wouldn't find out just standing there.

"So… who's going with me?" Jamie asked.

Jade raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Aren't we… all going?"

"Shouldn't two of us scout ahead to make sure it's actually safe first? I'm… not getting a good vibe from here."

Jade hummed in thought. "I suppose that makes sense. Carry on then. Just be careful."

"Oh please, 'careful' is my middle name!" Jamie scoffed. Jade rolled their eyes in response.

"I-It is…?" Luna asked hesitantly.

"Of course not!"

"Oh…"

Jamie suddenly nudged Luna in the side. "C'mon Luna, let's go check this out."

"Y-You're asking me t-to go with you?"

"Well, duh! Is there anyone else named Luna here?"

"Uh…" Rather than finishing their answer though, they instead began to fidget with their hands. They felt too uncomfortable, and unsafe, to willingly go deeper in the volcano. They

preferred if someone else went instead—

Jamie grabbed one of Luna's hands and gave it a gentle squeeze. Though… they seemed a bit irritated. "How about now?"

"O-Okay…" Luna clenched a little tighter.

"Jeez, you really like holding everyone's hands, don't you…?" Jamie sighed. "Actually, nevermind, don't answer that. Let's go."

The two of them then set off deeper into the volcano. As they went deeper, Luna's anxiety crept in more and more. Though, with Jamie by their side, they were able to muster enough confidence to suck it up and deal with it.

They were soon in the middle of the volcano. Almost immediately, they noticed that the platform they were standing on was surrounded by lava. It was still somewhat far down, but… it was still lava, which made them feel incredibly uneasy.

If nothing else, it at least solved the mystery on how the ground was being lit up.

"Hey…" Jamie tugged on Luna's hand. "Don't focus on that. Look up."

"Up…?" They heeded Jamie's advice and looked up. Needless to say, they were a bit surprised at what they saw.

Much like they saw near the entrance, they saw several rocks and other platforms covering the inside walls of the volcano. However, they also saw some other rocks that seemed bright with lava forming in the cracks. They assumed that those would be hot to the touch and would likely be an inconvenience on their way up.

The middle of the volcano, on the other hand, was not quite as populated with things to climb. Instead, there were a few bridges with gaps in the middle of each of them. They could possibly use those later to get across to the other side, and hopefully to a better path, but they'd need to stick to the walls until then.

Last, but certainly not least, they noticed sunlight peaking through the gaps between all of the debris in the way. They suddenly felt a lot more enthusiastic about climbing knowing that they wouldn't just end up climbing up to a dead-end and get trapped.

The sight of the sun seemed to soothe them a little bit, but it also allowed their fatigue to creep in a little more. They let out a yawn as a result. Thankfully, Jamie didn't seem to notice or if they did, they didn't really care.

Oh, right, they were scouting the place out with Jamie.

They tugged on Jamie and pointed up towards the light. "S-See that, Jamie? There's l-light!"

"Huh…?" Jamie squinted their eyes as they tried to find what Luna found. "Oh! Yeah, I see it too! You're, uh, getting pretty good at this stuff."

Luna was quite flustered by the compliment which also bolstered their confidence even more. They weren't really used to positive affirmations even with a few days of being showered in them, but those still helped them crawl out of their shell a bit more. They wanted more of that.

They figured the best response would be one of a similar nature. "I l-learned from the best!"

"The…" Jamie paused to process what Luna said. "*Oh.* Uh… yeah! The best! That's me!" They then flashed a toothy grin at Luna, who responded in kind. "Alright, I think we should start moving. I can't imagine this lava's just gonna stay there."

Well, that was a harsh snap back to reality. Jamie was right though. They really couldn't sit here and just compliment each other all day. They still had a volcano to climb. Maybe they'd get time to relax and chat again at the top?

"Y-Yeah… let's—" A yawn slipped past them. Jamie *definitely* heard them that time.

Thankfully, Jade and Riley appeared behind them, freeing them from that conversation. "O-Oh! Uh, hi you two! I t-think we can climb up here!"

Jade looked up and nodded. "Looks like it." They too squinted their eyes then widened them in surprise. "And there's light at the top too! Nice!"

That was probably the most excited Luna had ever seen Jade. Based on Jamie's reaction, it was likely the same for them as well. It was nice to see them excited about something for once.

In the midst of all of that, Jamie let go of Luna's hand and started walking towards a nearby rock while Jade and Riley were still looking up. Since the latter were preoccupied, they followed Jamie to do some more scouting by the rock.

It was actually very close to the platform they were on and seemed to have enough space for all of them. Though, there was another rock just a few feet above it, so they'd all either have to crouch or sit to be able to fit. Maybe the rock above had somewhere safe to stand too…?

However, while the first rock was very close, they did have to drop down a bit and walk across warmer ground. This wasn't a concept they were unfamiliar with, given they just walked through a field full of that stuff, but they were getting tired of it.

Speaking of tired, they yawned again and their eyes felt just a little heavier. Not getting that sleep back at the fire was really starting to become noticeable. Hopefully they'd get out of here sooner than later so they could get some rest.

Jade and Riley had once again somehow sneaked up on them. They knew they weren't doing it to be mean, but it was starting to get irritating.

"Guess I'll go first," Jamie said.

Jamie then stepped down to make their way across, but immediately cringed at what Luna could only assume was the heat. Instead of complaining about it though, they quickened their

pace to the rock and sat down at the far end of it.

Well, it looked like it was Luna's turn now. *Lovely.*

They took a step down and similarly cringed at the discomfort. However, their evil thoughts didn't weigh them down this time so they instead ran for the rock. When they were close enough, they lunged towards it and clung on to the side. Jamie pulled them up the rest of the way.

They took the little bit of time they'd have waiting on Jade and Riley to sit down. Even if they couldn't actually sleep, it at least felt nice to get off of their feet for a bit. However, they only started to doze off instead, so they forced themselves up before they could actually fall asleep.

*Can't even sit without falling asleep…*

Jade and Riley hesitated to follow suit, though initially Luna failed to understand why. However, they soon noticed it *was* quite cramped with just them and Jamie. Perhaps their initial assessment of everyone fitting there was wrong.

"I think you two should go up before me and Riley continue," Jade suggested.

Jamie nodded. "Agreed. Lemme just go up there and make sure it's actually safe though." They then began climbing without waiting for a response. Luna was starting to dislike that behavior.

After about a minute, Jamie called out from above. "All good up here! Shouldn't be a difficult climb for any of you."

Luna took that as their cue to climb up and just like Jamie said, it was not difficult at all. Now, if only every other climb could be as easy as this one…

In fact, every other climb *was* that easy, at least for some time. It seemed that every rock was conveniently placed to slowly spiral upwards towards the top. They were grateful for this since the climbs ended up being very low energy. They couldn't imagine having to make a bigger climb while fighting their fatigue.

Unfortunately though, the "staircase" of rocks did eventually disappear, and the next rock was maybe fifty feet up. There was no way any of them were making that. Not even Jamie could pull that off, even if they were at their peak.

To make matters worse, the volcano suddenly rumbled. The shaking was gentle, but still noticeable enough to catch their attention. They attempted to look down, but Riley cupped their face before they could. "Don't look down. It's not worth it."

"B-But—"

"Hey! There's some kind of bridge over here!" Luna and Riley turned to spot Jamie waving towards what was, in fact, a bridge. Well, not a bridge in the traditional sense but… it *looked* like one at least. "Just gotta clear this gap and we can keep going up!"

Jade instantly followed Jamie without asking questions. Luna and Riley stayed back for a moment though.

Riley stared at the gap with a concerned look on their face. “I think we should give it a shot. We don’t exactly have a choice.”

Luna nodded hesitantly. They didn’t forget the last time that Riley nearly missed a jump. “Y-Yeah…”

The two of them then proceeded to the bridge. Jade and Jamie had already made it across, so hopefully it’d be easy for them to cross as well.

Luna tapped Riley on the shoulder, who then turned around out of curiosity. “What’s up, Luna?”

“I t-think you should go first… just in case.”

“But what about—”

“C’mon, get on with it already!” Jamie groaned.

Riley sighed. “Alright, but I want you to be right behind me.”

“O-Okay.”

Riley then backed up a bit and then charged towards the gap. This time, thankfully, they effortlessly cleared the gap. They had landed pretty far away from the edge, which did instill some confidence in Luna.

If Riley could make the jump, they could too, right…?

Luna mimicked Riley’s motions down to the exact amount of steps taken back. They then started charging for the gap too and jumped just before reaching the edge. They stuck a clean landing on the other side, and much like Riley, had a lot of room for error.

They really needed to have a lot more confidence in themselves. They were clearly capable of a lot of great things. All they felt right now though was the strong urge to take a nap.

Nobody stuck around to compliment them, instead opting to climb up another rock nearby. They felt sad for a moment, but remembered why everyone was in a hurry when the volcano shook again. Very quickly after, they grabbed onto the rock and climbed atop it.

They once again climbed up a bunch of rocks with few issues, but this time came across a hot rock. Unfortunately, there was no bridge to bail them out this time. On the opposite of end of the hot rock was a cooler rock with luggage though, so maybe it’d be worth crossing it?

Furthermore, that rock seemed to lead to other rocks, so it probably wasn’t a matter of “maybe,” but “definitely.”

Jamie hummed in contemplation. “Hmm… I think if we run quickly across this rock, we’ll be fine. Just don’t think about it and we can open the suitcase on the other side. Easy-peasy!” However… they hesitated to walk across.

“If it’s easy-peasy, why not do it then?” Riley teased.

Jamie gave Riley the ugliest look possible in place of voicing their irritation. They grumbled something under their breath and then stepped onto the hot rock. Almost instantly, they hissed but still committed to it. They ran across to the other side and sat down on top of the suitcase to caress their feet.

That did *not* instill confidence in Luna. However, much like with the bridge, they didn’t seem to have a choice.

Luna squeezed by both Jade and Riley and just started running across the rock without thinking. Their feet instantly felt like they were on fire, but the sooner they made it across, the sooner they’d stop suffering.

Once they made it across, they quickly leapt on top of the suitcase and sat beside Jamie. It was only then that they similarly hissed in discomfort. They were suddenly concerned they’d doze off again, but it was unlikely given the discomfort they were in. They gave a shaky thumbs-up to Jade and Riley to say they were fine.

However, Riley looked down and seemed to have spotted something. “Oh! We could’ve just gone around the rock and climbed back up.”

“Seriously!?” Jade, Jamie and Luna all said in unison.

Riley nervously chuckled and rubbed the back of their neck. “Yeah…?”

“Whatever. Just get over here so we can open this up and leave,” Jamie said.

Jade and Riley then quickly dipped down to wherever Riley spotted, leaving the two kids alone temporarily.

“Unbelievable…” Jamie sighed. “Convenient that they only find it *after* we get across, right?”

“Yeah…”

Jade and Riley appeared once again completely unscathed. For the first time in their life, Luna felt slightly irritated at that.

How *convenient.*

…

Why were they so irritable since entering the volcano…? They knew they were getting tired but… that couldn’t have been it, right?

Jamie hopped off of the suitcase and tapped Luna on the knee. “Get up, Luna. Let’s pop this bad boy open and see what we get!”

Luna complied and got off of the suitcase. Their feet still stung a bit from the heat, but it wasn’t enough to keep them down anymore. Nobody would’ve cared anyways.

Jamie quickly removed the latches from both sides of the suitcase then stepped back to avoid being smacked in the face by it. Once it was open, both kids returned to it peered inside. All that was sitting inside was another first aid kit and some more trail mix.

“Ugh, I’m so tired of trail mix…” Jamie complained. “Anyone want this? I’m not making room for it.”

Riley slid by Jamie and grabbed the first aid kit. They then tossed their backpack down beside the suitcase and shoved the first aid kit in between the rescue claw and a coconut. However, Luna noticed the statue was missing. Where did it go…?

“Anyone…?”

“I think Luna wants some,” Riley suggested.

“Uh, I d-didn’t—”

Jamie shoved the trail mix into Luna’s hands and watched them expectantly.

Luna figured Jamie wouldn’t move on until they ate, so they opened up the bag and dumped all of the trail mix into their mouth. It was very crunchy and salty, and honestly wasn’t really that filling, but it was still food.

Content with what they saw, Jamie then looked around in the volcano to figure out where to go next. Their eyes soon settled on a bridge a little higher up, though the gap seemed much wider than the previous one. Luna was *really* hoping they wouldn’t—

“Looks like that bridge is our next goal.”

*Of course* it was. They couldn’t just use all of the rope they had?

They ended up echoing this thought out loud. “W-We can’t just use the r-rope we have…?”

“Rope goes *down*, not *up*, silly! Can’t exactly make progress with that,” Jamie teased.

Unfortunately, Luna was now in the mood to be a bit argumentative. “Y-You can’t just… p-put some down when you get across?”

Jamie shrugged. “Guess I never thought about that. Let’s go.”

Luna still seemed very wary about it, but again, nobody seemed to care. Everyone else grumbled in agreement then continued the repetitive process of climbing rocks until they reached the second bridge.

Unfortunately, their eyes didn't deceive them. The gap was definitely much wider than the last, which meant the possibility of someone falling was much higher. To make matters worse, there was nothing beneath them to stop them from plummeting into the lava below.

Well… there was the first bridge they crossed earlier, but it was far enough down that it'd certainly kill them even if they somehow managed to land on it. So, that wasn't an option.

They didn't have any other options though. They could either cross the gap and move on from it or sit there and let either the lava or their hunger take them. The former was scary, but the latter was even scarier, so it seemed obvious what they should do.

It seemed pretty obvious to Jamie too since they once again cleared the gap before everyone else. Their landing was a lot less graceful this time though and they were actually pretty close to clipping the edge with their foot.

So maybe Luna had a good reason to not want to do this. If even their most fit scout struggled with crossing the gap…

Jamie tossed the backpack on the ground and fished for some rope. It seemed, for once, *someone* had listened to what Luna said.

They soon pulled a spool of it out of their bag and shoved the stake into the end of their side of the bridge. They tugged at it a bit then began to tie a knot around it with the rope. They left enough rope to droop down a few feet from the gap, which would hopefully be enough… just in case. They gave it all one final tug and then gave a thumbs-up.

"Heh, think you can make this jump too, Riley?" Jamie teased.

Riley rolled their eyes. "I've improved since the desert."

"*Riiiight.* Prove it then."

Riley shrugged and then jumped across the gap. Thankfully, they didn't need the rope, but they were dangerously close to falling off. Jamie noticed this and quickly came within range of Riley to give them something stable to grab onto.

Once Riley re-stabilized and cleared the landing zone, Jade glanced over at Luna. However, Luna shook their head, so Jade was the next to make the jump. They cleared the gap a little more gracefully than Riley and similarly didn't need the rope.

Once again… it was their turn.

They still felt incredibly uncomfortable about this gap. While they did have the reassurance of both the rope and their friends, they just couldn't help but think that something would go wrong. The gap was a little too wide for comfort.

The volcano once again rumbled, though it was a little more violent than before. Regardless, it did put some pressure on them to just make the jump and get it over with. The sooner they got it over with, the better…

*Right?*

They took a few steps back—a bit farther back than last time—and then charged towards the gap. As soon as they reached the edge, and right before jumping, the ground crumbled beneath them.

To make matters worse, they completely missed the rope in the chaos, which meant they were now free-falling towards the lava *and* their death.

Maybe Edmond was right after all. They really *were* just a clumsy, stupid, worthless kid. They deserved every bad thing that was thrown at them.

At least they'd finally get the sleep they were looking for.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: It was at this point I realized that the peaklings had a little too much plot armor and needed to feel threatened again

# Chapter 29: Alone

Everything started to become a blur as they reached terminal velocity. They couldn't make sense of anything around them anymore. They could barely even *think* about anything.

That only made their imminent demise all the more easier to accept. If they couldn't see it or feel it, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe they'd just instantly go out and not have to suffer.

That sounded nice. At least then, they wouldn't have to ever see him again. They wouldn't have to be a *burden* anymore.

For the first time in forever, they truly felt at peace.

They also felt incredibly tired too, so they just closed their eyes and let it happen. They actually almost fell asleep until…

They were suddenly jolted awake when their momentum came to a halt. For a moment, they felt incredibly distorted. Once they came to their senses though, they noticed they were no longer falling, but floating.

Wait… *floating*?

They also suddenly felt warm. Not overbearingly warm, but nice hug warm. Did being close to lava normally feel like that?

They hesitantly opened their eyes and noticed they were suspended just a few feet above the lava. Strangely enough, it didn't burn them alive. Perhaps the mysterious golden aura around them was the reason for that?

That made no sense though. That was literal *magic*. How the heck were they doing that? *Why* were they doing that?

They never got any answers though. They were instead drifted away from the lava and set down gently atop a rock. While the aura did persist, they were finally in full control of their body again.

As much as they just wanted to collapse and cry their heart out, they were also still dangerously close to the lava. They couldn't just wait for their friends either; they'd likely burn to a crisp doing that.

In spite of their inner turmoil, they did manage to get a quick scan of their surroundings. It was better to at least figure out *where* to go before they accidentally threw themselves towards the lava again. It was very unlikely they would be saved like that again.

That much was unfortunately confirmed when the aura suddenly dissipated. It seemed like they only had one more chance to get this right.

They did spot the “staircase” they had climbed a while ago, though it was inaccessible from where they were. They also spotted the first bridge they crossed, which meant they were very far down. They looked a little higher than that and saw the bridge they just fell from, but a stray ray of sunlight made it impossible to see if anyone was up there looking for them.

*Your “friends” probably forgot about you the second you fell down. You’re nothing more than a burden to them.*

Luna froze. They weren’t really expecting to hear his voice again, and yet, there it was. What cruel things would it say this time?

*You’re all alone and you don’t know how to do **anything** on your own! Why not just throw yourself back into the lava and just **die** already?*

They glanced over at the lava briefly, but then jumped back and sat down against the wall. Their breathing started to quicken.

Why were they actually considering that? They didn’t want to die! They had a lot of people waiting for them!

*Don’t lie to yourself, kid. Nobody wants you. Nobody would miss you. Not even I would.*

Luna involuntarily clenched their fists. Their breathing got even heavier. They weren’t *scared* by any means… but then, what *was* that feeling?

*Nothing you do will change the fact that you’ll die alone. Your friends left you because you were a dead-weight. You provided nothing to your “troop” other than being a **whiny little shit**.*

They stood up and took a step back from the wall they were just leaning up against. Their fists were still clenched and some kind of bad feeling was really starting to bubble in their chest. They… didn’t like it that much.

*Face it. You’re **nothing** without me. You’re **nothing** without your pathetic “friends.”*

They suddenly imagined one of the rocks was Edmond’s face. An ugly, scruffy, jagged and empty-looking face. A *stupid, wrinkly, mean* looking face.

And then they suddenly snapped.

“JUST SHUT UP ALREADY!”

They swung at the rock but immediately winced in pain the second their left fist made contact with it.

Any anger they could’ve felt was immediately replaced with both pain and fear. So much pain radiated from their hand unlike any they’ve ever felt before. They took one look at the back of their hand and saw several open wounds across most of their fingers. All of them were bleeding at an alarming rate and the pain continued to burn.

They gripped at their wrist, but they knew well that was placebo at best.

It was then that their primary goal shifted from finding their friends to finding a first aid kit. They *really* needed to tend to this before it could get much worse.

However, they noticed that both their backpack and their, no, *Jade's* hat were missing. They didn't concern themselves with how their items went missing though. It didn't matter anyway. It wouldn't have brought them back.

"J-Just… p-perfect…" they let out through choked sobs.

They had nothing, no one, and no idea where to go. On top of that, they had a hand that was bleeding and probably messed up in some way.

They finally flexed their fingers. The wounds stung as they were stretched out, but being able to flex their fingers was a good thing, right?

"T-That's reassuring… At least I… d-didn't break my own h-hand… haha…"

If Jamie were here, they probably would've had a much easier time figuring out where to go. Though, at the same time, if Jamie were here, they probably wouldn't have lashed out the wall out of anger either.

They missed their scouting buddy. Well, they missed *all* of them, but especially Jamie. It seemed like they understood Jamie the most and vice versa. It probably helped that they were close in age.

They wiped away a stray tear that made its way down their cheek. They really were hurting in a lot of ways now. They just wanted to be back with their friends, but first… finding a first aid kit.

As they discovered earlier, the "staircase" was inaccessible and every other familiar landmark was out of reach. The only other way up then was the rock they attacked earlier. They weren't entirely sure if there was even a route from there, or if there was even somewhere to stand at the top, but evidently they didn't have many options.

They approached the rock again, this time with no violent intent, and started to climb. Unfortunately, the spot they hit was the same spot they'd need to set a foot to push themselves up. They cringed almost immediately when they could feel the slight squishing of their blood beneath their sole, so they quickly boosted themselves upwards.

Thankfully, the top wasn't too far up *and* it did have a flat area to stand on, so they were at least right about that. It really shouldn't have been a big deal, but it felt nice to be right about something for once. They had been told their whole life they were wrong, so…

They saw a small platform about ten feet above them, then a larger one a few feet across from that one. The first wasn't safe to sit on, given how small it was, but they could use it to get to the second one. In spite of their current condition, it was definitely doable, so they decided to go for it.

Once both feet were on the platform, they realized just how small it really was. There was barely enough space for both of their feet to fit, so they imagined it wouldn't hold their weight for long.

Their suspicion was confirmed when a chunk of the platform suddenly broke off.

They hesitated for a moment before making the jump to the larger platform. The instant they did, the small platform became nothing more than a memory. The remnants crashed down to where they initially started and exploded into dust.

Had they had that kind of reaction time back on the bridge…

It didn't matter. It already happened. Thinking of alternate outcomes wouldn't fix the situation they were currently in.

They stopped for a moment to once again scan their surroundings. However, their eyes almost instantly landed on a suitcase, so they abandoned their scouting mission for now. They swung open the suitcase, revealing…

Oh… wow! A granola bar, a sports drink *and* a first aid kit!? Maybe their luck was starting to turn around for the better!

They instinctively reached for the food and drink, but a sudden stinging pain in their left hand reminded them that they were still injured. Perhaps they could reward themselves with those *after* taking care of themselves?

They instead grabbed the first aid kit and opened it up. They fished for the bandages and then set the kit back down exactly where they found it. This would be a little more difficult performing first aid on themselves, especially when they weren't using their dominant hand, but…

Their eyes suddenly welled up as they were reminded that they were completely alone and there was nothing they could do about that. However, they quickly rubbed their eyes with their arm and tried to focus on performing first aid again. The sooner they did it, the sooner they could refuel and get moving again.

They first wrapped the bandage around their wrist then around their palm between their thumb and index finger. After that, they started to weave the bandage between their fingers, making sure to cover up until the knuckles near the tips of their fingers. They then wrapped another layer over everything just to make sure it was all secure, then tore off the remaining bandage.

The tips of their fingers were still covered in dry blood, but at least the wounds were covered up. They could clean those up later when they had an abundance of water to clean with. They didn't want to spend their sports drink on that when they were becoming increasingly thirsty.

They almost tossed the bandages back into the kit, but they instead decided to pocket them. They remembered that they didn't have their backpack anymore, so they wouldn't have been

able to take the entire first aid kit with them. Even if they couldn't bring the entire kit with them, they could at least hold onto the bandages.

Satisfied with their work, they grabbed both the granola bar and sports drink then sat down in front of the suitcase.

However, instead of instantly tearing into either of those things, they instead stared at them. They felt incredibly hesitant to eat them. Any time there was food seemingly left out for them, there was *always* a catch. Maybe something along the lines of "it's not only yours" or…

Right… nobody was around to lecture them now. The only people alive on this island were much higher up in the volcano *and* have already been incredibly generous with their limited food. They wouldn't care if Luna indulged a bit… maybe.

Then… it'd be okay if they kept this for themselves, right…?

Despite their paranoia, they did eventually start to nibble on the granola bar. Their eyes constantly scanned their surroundings though, just in case anyone decided to jump out from the shadows and harass them about it.

On the bright side, this particular granola bar did have chocolate chips in it. Chocolate chips were their guilty pleasure, so that just made this an even sweeter treat. While the chocolate chips did unfortunately melt from the heat, they at least helped make the granola bar a bit less dry.

After a few minutes of slowly nibbling away at the granola bar, all that was left in their hands was the wrapper. However, crumbs had gotten all over their face and lap, as well as some stray chocolate surrounding their mouth.

They felt a bit foolish being so messy about it, but again, nobody was around to lecture them. It'd be okay this one time… hopefully.

They missed having someone to enjoy a sweet treat with. Even though neither the cookies nor the marshmallows were healthy, they enjoyed being able to share them with Jamie. Just their sheer presence alone made it a nice time.

A stray ray of sunlight somehow struck them directly in the eye, causing them to subconsciously readjust their hat. However, they suddenly felt sad when all they felt was their hair.

Right… their hat was gone.

They sighed then put the wrapper back into the suitcase. As wrong as it felt, it was the closest they were getting to throwing it in a trash can. At least they weren't just throwing it out in the wild. *That* would've been a big no-no.

They unscrewed the cap on the sports drink and didn't think twice before guzzling it. They were *really* craving something to drink, so they didn't bother to preserve what they had.

In spite of the oddly named “Tryhard Sweat” drink, it actually tasted good! The closest flavor that they could identify it as was grape. While it wasn’t their most favorite flavor, they weren’t exactly in a position to be picky either.

Once finished with their drink, they set the bottle down beside the granola bar wrapper then closed the suitcase.

A random question crossed their mind: What went wrong with rescuing them? They had entrusted Jamie to the rescue claw, so… what happened?

Many possibilities swirled through their mind, and strangely enough, *abandonment* was the first one they settled on.

That… didn’t really make any sense though. Given how Jamie had opened up and been more friendly towards them, it really didn’t make sense for them to just… let them fall.

They shook their head. Nope, it definitely wasn’t that. It just didn’t make sense.

Maybe the claw failed then? Those things *were* prone to breaking at the worst time. It would’ve been really unfortunate if that was the case but it was far better, and logical, than the former possibility.

They nodded their head this time. That sounded like a much more reasonable theory.

Why was abandonment their first thought…?

It didn’t matter. What did matter was continuing upwards. Regardless of the reason *why* they weren’t rescued, they still *weren’t* rescued. It was on them to rescue themselves.

Out of the corner of their eye, they spotted a strange white and blue rock sitting in the side of the wall. It was pretty big and seemed to block their only path forward, which was rather inconvenient.

Though… if it was white and blue compared to the red hot rocks… maybe it was *cold* instead? That would be a nice change of pace if that were the case.

They walked up to and grabbed onto the mysterious rock. However, they didn’t feel anything. What was the catch then…?

They continued upwards since any threat didn’t immediately rear its ugly head. Once at the top, they stopped for a moment to catch their breath.

They noticed they were incredibly out of breath after that. Not only that, but they could’ve sworn their muscles started to feel a little more stiff too…

Wait. *That* was the catch. It wasn’t burning their skin off, it was slowly killing them from *within*.

As much as their body screamed at them to stop, they knew they’d be worse off if they stayed on that rock any longer. So, they dashed as quick as they could to the next rock, but not

without extra aches and pains from their legs.

Unfortunately, whatever effect that rock inflicted on them didn't go away, unlike the fire rock. Even with a minute to rest, their lungs still felt heavy and their muscles still felt stiff. That was *exactly* what they needed right now!

This added problem in tandem with their slightly fuller stomach on top of everything else just made them incredibly tired. Their body was inching dangerously close to just collapsing on the spot, but they… were running out of energy to resist that.

They decided to use their last little bout of energy to push onward. They'd only stop whenever their body forced them to. They could only hope it'd happen at a time that wouldn't greatly inconvenience or harm them.

The rock they stood on seemed to lead into a bunch of other rocks that would at least get them to the next large platform. Maybe if they could make it to there, they could rest for a little bit…

They blinked and another wave of fatigue crashed into them *hard*. Their body attempted to drop them to their knees, but they quickly latched onto the wall and forced themselves back up.

*Not here… please… anywhere but here…*

*Riley… Jade… Jamie… where are you…?*

Their legs felt really wobbly for a moment, but somehow re-stabilized just enough for them to continue.

They reached for the next rock for what would hopefully be a quick climb. However, with their sudden onset of extreme fatigue, it felt like an eternity.

Everything really started to settle in now. Their loneliness, their physical ailments, their horrible life outside of this island. It seemed that everything they had bottled up had nothing in its way now.

They wanted to cry, but they were too tired to even do that.

Instead, they just pushed themselves off the ground… or at least tried to. The first time, they face-planted back into the ground. Subsequent attempts only resulted in the same outcome, and yet, they persisted.

Unfortunately for them though, their determination was superseded by their fatigue. It seemed that it was no longer possible to ignore it. Their body was starting to shut down and they just had to sit there and accept it.

*No… please… not… now…*

The most that they could do was roll into a small crevice formed by the wall and rock converging. Anything else was simply too strenuous for them now.

Just as they took in one final look of the world around them, they could’ve sworn they saw a ghost floating nearby as stairs started to form, both of which had that same mysterious golden aura from before.

The ghost tried to say something to them, but it seemed that most of their senses had already given up on them to be able to process it.

And then the world went dark.

# Chapter 30: Never Abandon a Friend in Need!

Chapter Notes

> Given that Luna is now de-commissioned, we are forced back to Riley's POV. I explained it back on AO3, but in summary, staying in Luna's POV would just result in skipping the rest of Kiln which is cringe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That same scene kept replaying over and over in Riley’s head: Luna runs for the gap, the ground beneath them breaks, they miss the rope, then they’re gone. It constantly replays in their head, as if the world was trying to remind them just how terrible of a person they were for coaxing a *child* into doing something as dangerous as that.

Luna had even gone as far as to saying they *loved* them, and what do they do in return? Ignore their pleas to get some rest and disregard their safety in favor of chasing any hopes of escaping? How were they supposed to handle the fact that they’d indirectly harmed, or quite possibly killed, a child who placed all of their trust in them?

They had all the power to stop and rest, as well take control of the troop. However, they didn’t exercise it. It was only inevitable that their hands-off approach to this would eventually lead to someone being harmed. Maybe they weren’t really cut out for being a Scoutmaster after all…

They should’ve had more of a backbone. If they agreed to get some rest and told Jamie “no” when it came to these dangerous jumps, maybe Luna would still be here.

Instead, they were gone… probably dead—

They shook their head. Now was *not* the time to have such a defeatist attitude. Myres *did* promise them that something good would happen if they sacrificed the golden Bing Bong statue. They could only hope that “something good” meant that Luna would miraculously be alive. They could possibly have a chance at fixing this.

They chose to do it in secret because they didn’t want anyone to start getting reckless. Even if the kids have done an exceptional job at being cautious, they didn’t want the idea of what was effectively a cheat-death to allow them to disregard their caution. It was just far too risky.

They glanced over at Jade, who was just emptily staring at Jamie. They had no idea what was going through that kid’s head. Their lack of facial, or *any*, expression made it difficult to read them. Whatever they were thinking about was probably not positive though.

While they hadn’t played a significant role in the troop, instead mostly staying reserved to themselves, it was clear they had some degree of attachment to Luna as well. Not only that, but they also had to deal with the fact that their younger sibling was distraught by the situation.

Riley didn’t really like that Jade had the tendency to shut themselves in. Perhaps it was due to the fact that they had to be strong for Jamie, but that was incredibly bad for one’s mental health, let alone a *child*. They didn’t want to pry though. It just didn’t feel like the right time to.

“What now?” Jade whispered, their eyes still fixated on Jamie. It was clear the question was for Riley though.

*I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to speak up about that statue now…*

“Well… Myres… or, well, a ghost that looked like him, told me that if I dropped that gold statue in the lava, ‘good things’ would happen. My theory, and hope, is that this ‘good thing’ was used on Luna.”

“Get to the point,” Jade snapped. They winced immediately after, making it clear that wasn’t their intended tone.

“Right. So, I think the obvious thing to do here is to backtrack and keep an eye out for Luna. Ideally, they’ll be alive because of that… ‘good thing.’” They swallowed a lump that suddenly appeared. They hated what they were about to say. “And… if they aren’t… they at least deserve to rest somewhere better than *here*. But… I don’t want to start thinking like that, so…”

It seemed that Jamie had picked up on the conversation because they had perked up at the possibility of Luna being alive. “W-Wait! You’re saying… they could be alive!? The hell are we doing here, let’s go!” Their exclamation seemed more desperate than commanding.

Jamie then shoved Luna’s backpack into Jade’s hands. It seemed that Jade got the memo instantly because they put the backpack on right away.

“Well… if there’s a chance they’re alive…” Jade softly smiled. “Let’s go save them.”

Just as Jamie reached the edge of the platform to plot out the troop’s descent, a familiar ghost appeared from below.

*Myres.*

This time, he had some mysterious golden aura surrounding him. It seemed pretty close to the gold on the statue, so maybe dropping it in the lava had empowered him…? How was this good for *them* though?

Jamie jumped back instantly. “WHAT THE—”

“I apologize for the scare, but I must deliver some urgent news.”

“Urgent?” Jade asked. Surprisingly, they didn’t seem fazed by his appearance.

“Yes. First of all, thank you for your donation, Riley. If not for you… your little friend would be dead right now.” Myres paused as a proper staircase started to spiral up from below. “Now, with the power I have left, I’ve given you both a way down to Luna and a way out.”

“What’s the catch?” Jamie asked.

“The catch?” Myres laughed. “There is none. Riley held up their end of the deal, so I’m holding up mine. However… I didn’t have enough left over to get you all the way to the top, though I was at least courteous enough to have it drop you off near a cluster of rocks close to the top.”

“That’s perfectly fine. As long as we can get to Luna, I’m okay with whatever you can give us. And thanks for holding up your end of the deal.” Riley put out a hand to shake with Myres but then remembered he was a ghost. “Uh… right…”

Thankfully, Jamie butted in, getting the spotlight off of Riley for a minute. “Hey, why are you a ghost and not that creepy zombie looking guy? Did you, uh, die again?”

“Hmm… well…” Myres paused, as if he was trying to find the words. “When I died, the island claimed my body and expelled my spirit from it. Some dark force uses it as its puppet while my spirit is trapped in Nadir.”

“How are you here then if you’re supposed to be trapped?”

“The statue that Riley sacrificed to the volcano gave me just enough strength to escape momentarily and assist you. Of course, this isn’t permanent, so I will eventually have to return…”

“And how do we get to this ‘Nadir’?”

“It’s… impossible now. There were… four amulets scattered across this island that you needed to make the jump to Nadir. However, it seems you missed all of them. So… you can’t save me.”

“Can’t we just come back some other time and save you then?”

“I suppose you could, but why would you choose to come back to this forsaken island?”

“Oh, I dunno, maybe the whole ‘Rule 0’ thing you went on and on about in your journal?”

Myres seemed impressed by this. “Ah. So you kids do still pay attention…”

“I’m not here for a lecture, old man,” Jamie sighed. “Just tell me, can we come back and get you?”

“Of course. However… you need to go rescue Luna first.”

Jamie's eyes widened at the mention of Luna. "Oh, uh, right! I forgot! I'm sorry Myres, but we gotta go!"

"Yes, you do." The bottom of Myres' ghost started to fade away. "Ah, it seems like my time is up. Perfect timing, I suppose."

Riley reached out to Myres. "Wait! You're… really sure we can't save you now too?"

"I'm certain." He winced as more of his ghostly form faded. "Please, don't worry about me. I've had a good life. Don't take away Luna's."

Riley sighed. They weren't content with that answer, but he was right. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Well…" Riley saluted. "See you around, *Scoutmaster Myres*."

Before Myres could respond, he completely faded out, leaving nothing but the staircase he created behind.

*One day we'll come back for you Myres… that much I can promise.*

"I'm still kinda confused on why he's suddenly a ghost now," Jamie said.

"It's a little weird, yeah. Let's just get moving," Riley replied.

Riley then promptly started walking down the stairs with the siblings in tow. It felt odd to be taking charge again after Jamie had done it for so long, but they decided now was a good time to play a bit more of an active role in the troop.

Despite the fact that the stairs appeared to be made of stone, they were as soft as a cloud. However, they were still firm, so they at least had something that was both nice on their feet and safe to walk on. The stairs had a slight gold hue glossed over them, which was likely just a side effect of the statue's power.

For the most part, the descent was rather uneventful. The stairs seemed to perfectly evade any hazards and blockages, meaning it was as easy as just walking down. It almost felt a little *too* easy, but they weren't going to complain when they finally got their lucky break.

Though, they couldn't help but become increasingly nervous as they got closer to the lava. Not only did it go against their survival instinct entirely, but the fact that it was slowly rising meant they didn't have much time left to find Luna.

Myres didn't really give them any clues on where they were, but considering how far down the stairs were going…

"Woah! What's that?" Jamie stopped and pointed over towards a blue rock across from them.

"Hmm… looks like a blue rock," Riley ribbed.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Language."

Jamie blew a raspberry at Riley and crossed their arms. Though, in the midst of them feigning being annoyed, a smile made its way through. At least they still knew how to do that in wake of… all of this.

During that exchange, Jade split up from the group and seemed to be looking somewhere past the blue rock.

Riley paid no heed to what they were doing though and decided to look elsewhere along the wall. However, it all just looked the same: ugly brown rocks with the occasional hot rock in between, as well as that lone blue rock.

There were no signs of Luna, except… a faint trail of blood very close to the lava.

Wait… a trail of blood? That had to mean that Luna was close, right?

That trail seemed to lead up to a suitcase which had been tampered with. That much was evident by both the drops of blood on it as well as the latches not being re-secured. Hopefully they were able to find something in there to help them out.

However, the trail didn't seem to go anywhere beyond the suitcase, so unfortunately that clue just led to a dead-end. How frustrating. At least it did tell them Luna was likely close.

"Wait…" Jade stepped down a little bit and stuck their head out. "I see them!" Jade exclaimed. They were pointing over towards… somewhere out of Riley's line of sight.

Neither Riley nor Jamie had any reason to doubt Jade, so they allowed Jade to take charge. They were soon led to the bottom of the stairs, where Jade once again pointed out where Luna was.

They quickly spotted Luna who was laying unconscious in a crevice. However, instead of being happy, Riley was actually quite concerned. Them being unconscious could mean so many things, most of which weren't good. Considering they were nearly thrown into lava and had to deal with the fact they were alone… Riley wasn't optimistic.

They approached Luna and started looking for signs of life. They first observed their chest gently rising up and down. They could've stopped there, but they also wanted to check for a pulse. The second they put their fingers on their right wrist, they felt a pulse, so they finally came to the conclusion that Luna was alive.

They then noticed Luna's left hand was covered in bandages. Some spots of blood had leaked through, and the bandages seemed a bit dirty, so Riley made a mental note to examine their hand and replace them as soon as possible.

At some point, Jamie had appeared by Riley's side and grabbed Luna's right hand. They seemed rather distraught at what they saw, but before Riley could say anything, Jade intervened and dragged Jamie a little bit away.

Riley almost felt bad for them. They just wanted to see their friend again after being uncertain if they were alive or not.

With Jamie taken care of, Riley once again focused on Luna. They gently dragged them out from the crevice just enough to be able to properly examine them for injuries. However, they didn't seem to be injured anywhere else, but they did have very deep bags under their eyes.

They suddenly felt bad again for being complacent in, well, *everything*. Had they gone a little slower and just got some rest…

Riley shook that thought out of their head. It wasn't worth thinking about the past, they couldn't change it. What they *could* change was the present, and consequently, the future.

They noticed something large shoved into Luna's right pocket. They very gently stuck their hand in the pocket and soon landed on something cylindrical and… weird feeling. They wrapped their hand around the object as best as they could and fished it out, revealing that it was a roll of bandages.

*That would explain how they patched themselves up…*

They set the bandages down beside Luna and reached across to unwrap the bandages covering their left hand. They were extremely cautious with this, as they didn't want to hurt them more or accidentally disrupt their rest.

There were several clots of blood near the base and knuckles of every single finger. What stood out was the fact that these were on the *back* of their hand as opposed to, say, the palm. Considering they had no other injuries…

The cause of it didn't matter right now. They needed to replace the bandages. They'd have time to ask questions later.

They picked up the roll of bandages and began to wrap Luna's hand, first starting at their palm before slowly spiraling up towards the base of their fingers. They were very delicate with wrapping the bandage around each of their fingers as to not accidentally re-open the wounds. Once that was done, they tore the bandage from the roll and patted everything down to ensure it was secure.

They weren't the best at first aid though, so it did look a bit sloppy in the end. However, they still covered up all of the wounds, so that's what really mattered.

During the process, they had noticed the tips of Luna's fingers were also stained in blood, but at least that part of their fingers weren't damaged. They couldn't do anything about it anyway; liquids weren't exactly a commodity given their predicament.

Actually… they did have a coconut in their bag. They recalled taking it from Luna's bag at some point to ease their burden. Maybe they could use that? They'd be wasting all the water inside just to clean Luna's hand though…

On second thought, maybe that wasn't a good idea. Again, getting something to drink was incredibly difficult to come across, so they probably shouldn't use it on something that was entirely a cosmetic issue.

Suddenly, Jamie appeared to their left and grabbed onto Luna's freshly bandaged hand. They ended up just holding it while also gently patting the bandage. It would've been adorable, but given the circumstances, they were probably just scared.

They seemed to have calmed down a little bit after being consoled by Jade, but their eyes were still puffy and their breathing still a bit uneven. Being able to make contact with Luna did seem to aid in calming them down, so Riley made no effort in stopping them.

"Hey… I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I think we need to get moving." Jade motioned over towards the opening they were now standing near. "The lava's still rising and we've got to account for the fact that we're slowed down by carrying Luna."

Jamie finally set down Luna's hand gently. "Aren't we gonna have to… leave a backpack or…?" they inquired.

"I can carry them in my arms, at least for now," Riley replied. "If we've got to do some actual climbing later, I'll leave mine behind so I can carry them on my back."

Jamie nodded. "Okay… so… if what Myres said was correct, then we just need to reach the top of the stairs and climb the rest of the way to the top." They paused to observe where the stairs led to. "Hmm… yeah. Can't really see all the way to the top from here but I think that'll work."

Jade nodded. "Sounds like a plan then. Let's get out of here."

Riley gently scooped up Luna in their arms. It was only then they realized just how light Luna was, which was rather concerning. To make matters worse, they seemed somewhat thin as well. They hadn't really noticed that before since their uniform did a good job at covering that up.

Poor eating was one of the last things that Riley could've speculated was wrong with Luna. They got the impression that Edmond was a pretty messed up guy, but to go as far as to deprive Luna of one of the things they needed to *survive…?*

Edmond was going to pay for everything he did to Luna, one way or another. Riley didn't even care if *they* weren't the one to deliver justice, as long as it was delivered. Such a sick bastard didn't deserve to get off scot-free.

However… they needed to actually escape first. They couldn't beat the sh— *settle things* with Edmond if they couldn't even get out of this volcano. So, they turned that anger into motivation to keep pushing forward.

They finally turned around and saw that both Jade and Jamie were waiting near the base of the staircase, both of which seemed confused by Riley's inaction. They then took one glance to their right and saw the lava slowly rising, so they took that as their cue to get moving.

If there was one thing they were glad they paid attention to during their troop meetings and their time on this forsaken island, it was the one rule that Myres' whole identity would end up being formed around.

*Never abandon a friend in need.*

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: It was around this chapter that the final major content update was released, which made me think about writing a sequel fic. I put in some clues in this chapter about some of the stuff added with the update and some breadcrumbs that'll eventually lead into the next fic.

# Chapter 31: Escaping the Volcano

Riley initially hadn't paid any heed to Jade's comment regarding being slowed down because of Luna. Once they made the first step up the stairs though, they realized just how much of a responsibility they undertook.

Even if Luna wasn't particularly heavy—yes, they *were* still heavier than a full backpack—Riley was now once again entirely responsible for getting an unconscious life somewhere safer. The pressure that came with that kind of situation was nearly suffocating.

They did it once for Jade though, so they could handle doing it again for Luna. Additionally, things worked much better in their favor this time with Myres giving them a free path up, so they'd certainly manage.

Jade was ahead of the troop, which was quite a surprise. They didn't often take charge, but given Riley's extra load and the fact that Jamie wasn't doing too well, they didn't exactly have a choice now. They didn't seem to have a problem with it though, which Riley was grateful for.

Jamie, on the other hand, was only just a little farther ahead of Riley. However, they regularly caught glances at Luna, often resulting in them stumbling over themselves or the stairs. Riley *really* hoped that Jamie would eventually get the hint and stopped before they could fall into…

This time, Jamie tripped and fell dangerously close to the edge, which finally prompted Riley to scold them.

"Jamie, *please*, I know you're worried about Luna but you need to pay attention to what's in front of you. I don't think Jade wants to end up carrying you back up… or worse."

As soon as those words left their mouth, they felt terrible for saying them.

"Sorry," Jamie replied, just barely above a whisper.

Well, if nothing else, at least Jamie was paying more attention now. However, they also just started hugging themselves, which didn't help abate Riley's guilt in the slightest.

Jamie was quite possibly the most vulnerable they've ever been and rather than actually doing anything about it, Riley instead chose to shut them down. They could argue that they weren't really in the best place for that, both physically and mentally, but they still felt bad about how they handled it.

With the occasional thought of adoption passing through their mind over the past few days, they started to wonder if they were actually fit to take them all in. If they couldn't even correctly navigate something like this…

"Let's take a break," Jade suggested.

Riley was initially confused by that suggestion, but they soon realized they had already returned back to that bridge. Did time really fly by that fast while trying to juggle dealing with a vulnerable child and internal turmoil…? Time usually only flied by when they had fun…

Jamie didn't respond, instead *finally* peeling away from Riley and Luna to settle down up against the wall. They then stared at Riley, which they found a bit unsettling.

Riley finished climbing up the stairs so they could step back onto the bridge. They cringed a bit at the change in texture on the ground. The stairs were way too comfortable to abandon, but they needed a minute to rest.

They assumed that Jamie wanted Luna to be set down by them, so they set them down gently nearby and stepped back a bit. Almost immediately after, Jamie scooted over closer to Luna and put their head on their lap. Riley wanted to find this endearing but it was really difficult to given the circumstances.

With Jamie and Luna accounted for, Riley walked over to the edge and sat down. They let their legs dangle over and just stared at the lava that was slowly rising. They wouldn't have much time to rest but… at least they had *some* time.

They couldn't really spot where they found Luna at, but given the fact that several of the stairs were submerged in lava…

Well, had they hesitated for some time, Luna probably wouldn't be with them right now. It wasn't worth thinking about that outcome though. Luna was alive; that's all that mattered.

They noticed that the rescue claw Jamie had used was still up here. If they remembered correctly, those things had three charges, so maybe they could stash it for later? They *could* use it to get Luna up in a pinch, but they'd rather not do that unless absolutely necessary. Not after… that. They still had room for it in their bag though, so it wouldn't hurt to hold onto it.

They nodded at that idea and then stuffed it in their backpack. This time, they put it in with the claw facing up. It did give them less space to put items in around the claw, but they didn't have a particularly full bag to begin with, especially not after sacrificing the golden statue.

Jade soon joined them, prompting Riley to ask the following question: "Why aren't you with Jamie?"

"They wanted to be left alone for a while," Jade replied. "They're… not doing great right now."

"And you?"

"Huh? What about me?"

"Are *you* doing okay?"

"I'm fine." This answer came with hesitance though, which told Riley that wasn't the case.

“’Bottling up your emotions is a bad idea.’ That’s what you told me a few days ago, right?”

Jade chuckled then sighed. “You got me there.”

Riley didn’t respond, prompting Jade to continue. “I just… thought I’d be able to take care of Jamie throughout all this. I thought it’d be as easy as just… climbing a mountain and leaving! I didn’t think that it’d come with… all of this.” They fidgeted with their hands for a minute. “And…” They lowered their tone to a whisper. “After everything, I just… want to be a kid for a little longer. I only have two years left to do that.”

So they were really in the same boat then. Well, minus being a kid. Riley accepted that period of their life was over several years ago.

Suddenly, Jade stood up. They turned away from Riley but failed to hide that they were trembling a bit now. “I’m just… tired. I want to be able to enjoy life before I can’t anymore. I also want to make sure Jamie is taken care of though, which is clearly not happening with our grandparents…”

“Well, I know we had this conversation back in the desert but again: if, by some miracle, your grandparents surrender custody of you, I’ll…” Were they really ready to make that commitment anymore after what happened today? *Yes, I absolutely am.* “I’ll take you all in. You’ll all have some place safe to stay, someone that actually cares about you and you’ll get to enjoy your last years of childhood.”

Jade finally turned around. It seemed they were struggling to hold themselves together now. *Jeez, everyone’s vulnerable today, huh?* “You mean it…?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t say it if I— woah!”

Jade suddenly tackled them in a hug. Their grip tightened, which Riley responded to with a similar grip. Jade didn’t cry, though they didn’t really seem like the crying type anyways. Whether or not that was due to them engineering themselves *not* to do it, they wouldn’t know, but it seemed that even they weren’t above hugs.

“Thank you… that means a lot,” Jade muttered. They then pulled back, revealing a small smile on their face. They really did seem tired upon closer inspection. “I’ll… be waiting up ahead. We don’t have much time left.”

Riley let go, allowing Jade to leave whenever they felt like it. “Alright. I’ll fetch Jamie and Luna then. Don’t forget what I said though.”

“I won’t,” Jade replied. They then headed back to the stairs to wait for everyone else.

Riley approached Jamie, who was currently fixated on Jade. They only returned their eyes to Riley when they approached. “Is Jade…?”

“They’re just getting tired of everything, like everyone else is,” Riley replied. “Might be a good idea to keep moving. The sooner we leave, the sooner everyone can get some proper rest.”

Jamie complied, removing Luna's head from their lap and standing up. They took one final look at Luna, who fortunately wasn't disturbed throughout all of that, then left to join Jade on the staircase.

Riley once again scooped up Luna in the exact same way they did the previous time. Though, they weren't entirely sure how much longer they could carry them like this. They weren't getting *tired* by any means but they'd soon have to switch from walking to climbing, and they couldn't exactly carry Luna in their arms while doing that.

Maybe they should figure out how they're working around that sometime soon. For now though, they needed to worry about actually making it to that point. They still had plenty of stairs to walk up and the lava beneath them still threatened them.

They paused at the stairs when they noticed Jamie hadn't moved.

"Jamie…?"

"I'll follow behind you, just in case."

"Okay. If you say so."

The lava was still somewhat matching their pace, though it was much closer now due to the break they took, so they really couldn't afford to stop anymore. They could only hope those few minutes of downtime were enough for both Jade and Jamie to re-compose themselves. Any other moments like that would have to wait, no matter what.

After a few minutes, they started treading into uncharted territory. While there were still some of rocks to climb, it was becoming apparent that they were starting to become scarce, with the remainder requiring a massive climb to reach.

They came to the realization that had Myres not assisted them with these steps, they'd likely be in for one hell of a bad time. There was no way they were making those climbs with the resources they had and the fact that nobody was operating at one hundred percent. Not to mention that one of them was out of commission, so it worked out completely in their favor.

They were surprised that Jamie hadn't complained about the steps yet though. They seemed to constantly be antsy about climbing, but after Luna's near-death, it seemed they backed off from that almost entirely. They seemed to be focused more on survival than having fun at that point.

"Well… looks like we've reached the rocks," Jade sighed. "The stairs seem to stop here, so it looks like we're climbing the rest of the way up."

That much was to be expected given that Myres said so, but deep down they were *really* hoping that wouldn't have been the case. The stairs had the benefit of not only being nice to walk on but also making it extraordinarily easy to carry Luna up. The rocks were the complete opposite.

There were a clump of rocks with a platform beneath them that seemed to lead all the way to the top. They also noticed, at that point, that their line-of-sight of the sky and sun were completely unblocked. They weren't really much of an outdoors person, so it did come as a bit of a surprise that they missed those things, but given the alternative was a hot volcano…

"Riley?" Jamie asked from behind.

It was then that Riley realized they had zoned out again on the steps. "Oops, sorry."

"Is everything okay?"

"Just have a lot on my mind, buddy."

Jamie seemed to wince a bit at that. *Don't say that again. Noted.* "Okay."

Riley then continued onward until they reached the platform. Just like last time, they cringed at the transition to a more uncomfortable ground texture, but unfortunately that would also be the last time they stepped foot on those stairs.

They set down Luna in a small crevice away from the edge then tossed their backpack close-by. They were going to need to abandon their bag, so they decided now was a good time to take note of what they had and how they'd consolidate that into Jade and Jamie's bags.

They weren't entirely sure how much time they actually had, but they were certain the other two would warn them when they needed to leave.

They pulled everything out to assess what they had on them. A first aid kit, a rescue claw, bandages and a coconut. Not… exactly a full bag, but it's all they could find along the way.

They could probably find space in the first aid kit for the extra bandages, and they really hoped they could hand off the rescue claw to someone else. That just left them with the coconut then.

They weren't particularly concerned about the coconut being spoiled since those things were quite resilient in warmer climates. However, they didn't want to hold onto it for too much longer, so perhaps now was the time to consume it.

Initially, they considered giving it to Luna. However, given that they've been unresponsive to all external stimuli, it was unlikely that they'd wake up for it. Additionally, they *have* had more than everyone else lately but given how thin they were…

They then considered offering it to one of the siblings. It was more likely that the two of them would split it instead, which was still perfectly fine. They just needed to get rid of it in a way that'd actually benefit someone, rather than tossing it over the edge.

"Hey, you two wanna split this coconut?" they asked.

Jade and Jamie stared at each other, but the former simply shrugged.

“I think we’re okay, but if you’re trying to move all of the stuff in your bag into ours… I think I can hold onto it,” Jade offered.

“You think you could carry both that and the rescue claw?” Riley asked.

“I’m not sure. I think Jamie can—”

“N-No. I, uh… I’ll carry the coconut. Rescue claw’s all yours, Jade,” Jamie hastily interjected.

”Okay…?”

Jamie snatched the coconut from Riley and shoved it in their bag. Jade, on the other hand, was far more graceful with storing the rescue claw. Riley wasn’t entirely sure what Jamie’s deal was…

Then it hit them.

Jamie was *scared* of using the rescue claw now. Given that it failed to save Luna the first time, it only made sense that they wanted nothing to do with it anymore. They just didn’t want to have their hopes ripped from them again.

Logically speaking though, it *did* grab Luna’s backpack instead of Luna themselves. If they had a better angle, then they could’ve definitely rescued Luna. However, in this scenario, emotions clearly won over logic.

Regardless, now that both the rescue claw and coconut were accounted for, they just needed to sort out both their medical supplies and Luna so they could continue.

They pulled the first aid kit and bandages out from their backpack. They then opened the kit but was frustrated to find that the kit was already stuffed to the brim. This *was* normal after all but they wished that they could’ve also carried the bandages too.

*Wait… Luna kept them in their pocket… maybe I can too?*

They shoved the bandages in their pocket, and while it was a tight fit, they still fit just fine. That problem was solved then.

“Jade?”

“Mm?”

“Is it fine if I slide this first aid kit into your bag?”

“Mhm.”

“Okay.”

Jade turned just a little bit so Riley could approach them from behind and put the first aid kit in their backpack. Fortunately, they did have quite a bit of open space in the bag, so they were

easily able to slide the kit in.

Now that all of their items were accounted for, it was now time to figure out what they were doing with Luna.

Carrying a conscious person on their back was quite easy. An unconscious person on the other hand… not so easy. They also had to contend with climbing as well, which meant Luna would be very prone to falling off of their back.

While Jamie did have some rope, it'd still require them to go up and drop it down. They had used some back at the bridge, so they weren't entirely sure if they still had enough left over. Additionally, it did nothing to actually secure Luna in place while they were climbing, so they'd just run into the same issue there.

The anti-gravity rope gun, while theoretically more useful, still had the same issues as the regular rope.

They *could* tie Luna to their body with the rope but there were several problems with that. One, they'd actually need enough rope to wrap around both of them. Two, they'd need something sharp to cut the rope, because they'd likely struggle with undoing the knot.

They had carried Jade before back in the desert but the terrain then was a lot friendlier towards them. Here, they had several crevices and sketchy climbs and… Well, needless to say, carrying Luna would be significantly harder, if not impossible here.

All that left them with was the rescue claw. However, given that Jamie was seemingly traumatized by it now, they weren't entirely sure if that idea would go over well. Unfortunately though, it was the only idea that really seemed feasible.

Their plan was to wait for both Jade and Jamie to climb up to somewhere safe. They'd then clutch onto Luna as tightly as possible and the two of them would be dragged up by the claw. The only concern they had with this was a potential weight limit, but from what they remember, it could handle far more than their combined weight.

It sounded like a foolproof plan, but they weren't really sure if it'd work out well considering Jamie was incredibly anxious around the claw. Jade would probably be on board with the idea at least. They wouldn't find out until they proposed it though.

They echoed their exact plan out loud to the siblings and eagerly awaited a response.

As expected, Jamie seemed pretty anxious at the idea. "Can't you, uh, just climb up…?" They asked.

Riley sighed. "Look, Jamie. I've already run all of the possibilities through my head. Climbing, either on the rocks or by rope, is going to be a pain with Luna being unable to grab onto me themselves. We can't really tie them to me either because we don't have a knife to cut the rope, and it'd probably be a challenge to get them off of me after the fact."

“I… guess so. I just… don’t wanna lose more of my family—” Jamie suddenly covered their mouth and Jade suddenly went wide-eyed, though Riley didn’t really know why.

But then it hit them.

Jamie said “*family.*”

Jamie really considered them as *family*. It could’ve been a slip of the tongue, but that would’ve been a really crazy coincidence if that was the case, especially after the little chat Riley had with Jade earlier.

Riley smiled, but decided against pursuing that any further. “I know, but you’ve gotta trust me here Jamie,” they said. Jamie continued to fidget with their hands. “Say… I could actually use your help.” Jamie tilted their head. “Why don’t you climb up and scout out up there? See if there’s anywhere safe we can pull this off, stuff like that?”

Jamie nodded. “Okay. I think I can do that.”

“Great, thanks.”

Jamie then approached the rocks but initially hesitated. However, after a minute, they finally started to climb up. They were extremely cautious this time around, as evident by their slow and methodical movement. It was a stark contrast from their more messy and aggressive climbing style.

“Did you… not catch that…?” Jade whispered.

“I did, but I didn’t think pressing them about it would be a good idea,” Riley replied.

“I’m inclined to agree. You probably wouldn’t have gotten very far on that.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t seem like words are their thing.”

Jade shook their head. “Nope. Well… I suppose I should follow them up.”

Before Jade could do that though, Jamie soon popped back into view from above. “Hey! You two! I’ve got some good news!” They seemed much more enthusiastic than before.

“What’d you find?” Riley asked.

“Not only is there a flat surface up here but… a slope leading outta this place!”

“Can it be walked up?”

“Uh… I think so? It doesn’t seem too steep.”

“Alright. We’ll be up there soon.”

“Okay, good, because… the lava’s getting kinda close to you.”

*Oh crap. I totally forgot about the lava!*

Jade peered over the edge to confirm. “Yeah, they’re right. Let me get up there quickly and I’ll get you and Luna up.”

Riley quickly scooped Luna into their arms, this time holding them like a baby. They gripped as tightly as they could without causing physical harm. “Okay. I’m already ready. I think I’ll face away from you for the best results. Try to aim for my… waist?”

Jade nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. See you soon.” They then began their ascent the same way Jamie did. At the same time, Riley turned around so they were prepared to be grabbed.

They were finally getting out of this nightmare, and assuming that Myres’ journal entry was correct, this would also mark the end of their journey.

They felt a bit bittersweet at that realization. While they were happy to be escaping, they knew that they had a lot of work ahead of them still to give these kids the happy ending they deserved. They really wished they could just scoop them all up and run off into the sunset but… that’s literally just kidnapping, even if the kids themselves were okay with it.

Suddenly, they felt something hard and firm wrap around their waist. At the same time, their grip tightened just a little bit more on Luna. Shortly after, they were yanked up and they soon landed just beside Jade and Jamie.

“A warning would’ve been nice…” Riley groaned.

“I did warn you though…?” Jade said.

*Maybe I was too deep in my own thoughts then.…* “Eh, forget it. At least you got us up here safely. Thanks, Jade.”

“You’re welcome.”

Riley turned around to face their final challenge: the slope. It was a little steep, but it was likely at an angle that they could still walk up it no problem. They couldn’t really see much from there aside from the clouds in the sky, which was rather unfortunate. They were hoping to get some extra scouting done *before* making the climb.

“Well?” Jamie inquired.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Riley replied.

They began the ascent with Luna in their arms and Jade and Jamie in tow. Every step they took was more hopeful than the last. This was really it. Everything they worked for culminated in this very moment.

Once they reached the top, they took a look around. They seemed to be on a massive flat platform, though their visibility had been reduced to a few feet due to the thick fog. That seemed to temper their hope just a little bit, since it didn’t seem too promising.

However, the fog suddenly receded, giving them a clear view of their surroundings.

They once again looked around, confirming that it was just a massive platform. In front of them was a bridge, which seemed to lead to…

“THE PEAK!” Jamie cried out.

*The peak.*

# Chapter 32: The Culmination of Their Efforts

The peak was far more beautiful than they could've ever imagined. They just assumed it'd be yet another hunk of ugly looking mountain, but… no. It was… way better than that.

It was a small hill covered in grass and various types of flowers. At the top of it sat a flag and a crate, though the contents of the crate were unknown. Neither a campfire nor statue were present. Unfortunately, there seemed to be no food either, so they probably shouldn't linger for too long.

It wasn't much but it was far more inviting than every other part of the mountain they've been on. It gave them a proper place to rest, which everyone was in dire need of, until rescue arrived.

Riley again felt bittersweet at the sight. As much as they wanted to revel in the fact they were going home, they knew very well that things wouldn't just end there. Their own life and the fate of their children were still waiting for them beyond the mountain.

They weren't ready to go back to their monotonous life, and above all else, they weren't ready to let go of these kids. Even though they promised to take them in, they knew they were in for one hell of a journey to even make that happen. They just weren't ready to be separated from them so soon.

And yet, life still had to go on. They needed to accept that. Things weren't going to be easy but they didn't climb all the way to the top just to start giving up.

The final challenge that stood between them and the peak was a grass-covered bridge. Fortunately, it didn't have any gaps unlike the other ones. They were starting to get tired of jumping across gaps and nearly losing their kids to them.

"What are we doing just standing here?" Jamie asked. "C'mon, let's go!" They then bolted off towards the peak, disregarding the fact they needed to stick together.

"Jamie— gah, they're not going to stop, are they…?" Jade sighed. "I suppose I'll see you two up ahead." Jade ran off after Jamie, leaving Riley alone with Luna.

Riley really wished Luna could've been awake to see the peak. They definitely would've loved such a sight.

For a split second, they considered waking them up. However, given what they've been through, they really needed to get some rest. The poor kid's probably been through a lot more in those past few days than they have in their entire life.

Though… given they were stuck with Edmond…

Riley shook that thought out of their head and began walking towards the peak. They did have to take caution with Luna in their arms, meaning they couldn't run after the siblings.

They really had no reason to run anyways, they were safe.

They sighed in relief as the ground slowly transitioned from stone to grass. Their feet were *killing* them, so that was a much-needed change.

They soon caught up and saw that Jamie had settled down near the base of the hill and was fidgeting with some flowers. They were using said flowers to make something that looked a little bit like a flower crown. Riley wasn't entirely sure who it was for, but they did have a suspicion that it was for Luna.

Jade, on the other hand, seemed to be missing. They were likely close though, since Jamie didn't seem panicked about this information. That, or they were unaware their older sibling had disappeared. Either way, Riley should probably inquire about their whereabouts.

Jamie spotted Riley and beckoned them over. Once Riley got closer, they patted a patch of grass directly beside them, which Riley assumed meant "set Luna down here." Their assumption was confirmed correct when they set down Luna and Jamie smiled at them.

With nothing pressing left to do, Riley sat down for a moment to have a chat with Jamie. "Whatcha making, bu—uh, Jamie?"

"A flower crown, for Luna," Jamie replied. "And, uh… I don't… mind if you call me that. It just reminded me of…"

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's fine. You didn't know."

They really wanted to steer the conversation away from that now.

"Well, I look forward to seeing it when you're done. I'm sure they'll love it."

Jamie smiled warmly. "Yeah. I'm sure too."

"Alright, I'm gonna leave you alone so I can find Jade."

"They're at the top. Dunno what they're doing there but… that's where they said they'd be."

"Cool, thanks Jamie."

"No problem."

Riley then got up to head towards the hill but didn't get very far before Jamie called out to them.

"Wait!"

"Huh?"

“Listen… I’m not really an ‘I love you’ person like Luna is but… you and Luna are… pretty cool.”

Riley smiled. “You’re pretty cool too, Jamie.”

Jamie initially didn’t respond, instead staring at the half-made flower crown in their hands. Riley could’ve sworn they even saw a tear roll down their cheek.

“Thanks,” they finally replied. Their voice sounded a bit shaky but they cleared their throat. “You should check on Jade now. We’ll be okay here,” they suggested.

“Alright… I’ll be back soon.”

Riley then continued up the hill until they reached the top. Just as Jamie said, Jade was there. They were sitting down faced towards the sun. Before approaching them, Riley caught a quick glance at the box and confirmed there were flares in there. They then sat down to Jade’s left.

“Hello, Riley,” Jade said.

“Hey, Jade.”

“This is it, huh? It looks like our journey is about to be over.”

Riley sat down besides Jade. “Seems like it.”

“Before I lose the chance to, I just want to thank you. I know you probably feel like you don’t deserve it at times, but you’ve done a good job in keeping us together and getting us out alive.”

“It’s a team effort, Jade.”

“I know, but give yourself some credit too.”

Riley sighed. “I’ll try. And, uh… you’re welcome.”

“Oh, can I confess something to you?”

“Of course.”

“I’m a little scared to go back.”

“You’re not ready to face your grandparents again, are you?”

“Not really, no. Not after the time I’ve spent with all of you.” Jade chuckled. “It’s selfish, I know…”

“It’s not selfish to want what’s best for both you and Jamie. You all have my support.”

“I… thank you.”

“Now… I’m still a bit young myself so I don’t have much wisdom to part ways with, but if you need some help or someone to talk to… I’ll give you my number when we get back.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind. I’m just used to handling things on my own, so don’t take it personally if I don’t call often.”

“Yeah. I’m all too familiar with that. And don’t worry, I won’t be upset. We’ve all got our own lives to tend to, after all.”

“I guess… hopefully none of that happens though.”

Riley’s heart immediately sank. “W-What?”

Jade seemed panicked. “Wait, no! I meant like… hopefully I won’t have to settle with just your number. Hopefully…” They grimaced and stared at their lap. “Hopefully we can just… go with you instead.”

“Hopefully,” Riley echoed. “But… you do realize that’ll take time, right?”

Jade frowned. “It will?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how long exactly, but there needs to be time for me to even *apply* to foster, then all of the processes involved in that…”

“I see.”

“Look, if I could just run off into the sun with all of you, I would. That’s literally just kidnapping though.”

Jade chuckled. “How unfortunate.”

“Indeed.”

“Well… regardless of what happens after, I suppose it’s nice that we’re finally leaving. I imagine we’re all getting real tired of this place.”

“Oh, right! On the topic of leaving… when are we actually doing that?”

“Whenever you and Jamie are ready, we can light one of the flares. Jamie seemed pretty insistent about doing something before leaving though.”

“Yeah, they’re making Luna a flower crown.”

“Oh… that’s sweet.” Jade smiled. “So… yeah. When they’re done with that and you’re both ready to go—”

Suddenly, a pair of footsteps came stomping up from behind. *Jamie’s* footsteps. “Hey! Luna’s awake!”

Well, that just changed their plans entirely.

Riley snapped their head back towards Jamie. “Wait… Luna’s awake!?” both Riley and Jade asked in unison.

“Yeah! They’re, uh… kinda slow at waking up, but they’re awake! C’mon!”

“Holy shit…” Riley muttered under their breath.

They and Jade rose up and followed Jamie back to Luna.

When they arrived, Luna was in the midst of rubbing their eyes. They still seemed quite tired but Riley was very grateful that they were conscious again. Now, Riley needed to make sure they were okay.

Given they were still visibly tired, they’d probably end up going back to sleep later. As long as they stayed awake long enough to confirm they were fine, they were okay with letting them go back to sleep later.

Riley dropped down to their knees in front of Luna. Luna quickly acknowledged this and wrapped Riley in a hug.

“R-Riley! I… I thought… I thought…”

Riley patted Luna on the back. “Hey, it’s okay… you’re here with us. It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Luna tightened their grip and broke down, which only made Riley feel worse. They failed to save this kid before they could be put in such a predicament and yet, there they were, finding solace in their presence.

“I’m sorry, Luna—”

“S-Stop that…”

“Huh?”

“Stop…” Luna patted Riley on the back. “D-Don’t apologize…”

“But…” Riley sighed. It really wasn’t worth starting an argument. “Okay.”

The two of them remained embraced for a while. However, Luna soon pushed away gently.

“O-Okay, no more hugs f-for now…” They then yawned.

Riley complied and let go of Luna. They backed up a bit to give them some space and that’s when they once again noticed their left hand. Fortunately, the bandages didn’t seem stained that time, but they still needed to figure out *how* it got hurt in the first place.

“Hey, uh… quick question. What happened to your left hand?”

“Huh…?” Luna looked down at and flexed their fingers on their left hand. “O-Oh. I…” They sighed. “I s-saw Edmond’s f-face in a rock and… h-hit it.”

*Huh. I didn't know they were even capable of violence…*

"Dang, practicing to kick his ass without me?" Jamie teased. Luna giggled in response.

"Well, regardless of what happened, last I checked it seemed fine. Hopefully it's nothing major," Riley interjected.

"Y-Yeah. I t-think it's fine… I w-wouldn't be able to flex m-my fingers if it wasn't…"

"Probably gonna need to get that checked out when we get back to the airport anyways," Riley suggested.

"Maybe…" Luna's eyes widened a bit. "W-Wait… are we…?"

"Well, we've still got to wait on a helicopter and all that but… yeah. We're just about ready to leave."

"W-Wait… were you all w-waiting on me…?"

"Nope. We just wanted to relax and…" Riley glanced over at Jamie, who was very clearly hiding the crown behind their back. Luna seemed to not notice that. "Do some stuff before leaving."

"Oh, okay!"

They suddenly recalled the time Luna said they loved everyone again and…

"By the way… I'm sorry for not saying this earlier but… I love you too, Luna."

"W-Wha…?"

Jamie walked up and dropped the flower crown on Luna's head. "Me too, I guess. If that crown and being your friend didn't prove it… I dunno what will."

"J-Jamie…"

"It'd be nice to have another younger sibling," Jade added with a warm smile.

Luna broke out into a mix of laughing and crying. They then dragged everyone closer to them and wrapped them all in a hug.

Riley realized that this was the moment that really turned them from some ragtag troop into…

*A family.*

No matter what happened from this point forward, nothing was breaking that bond. Even if they weren't legally one yet, they could still acknowledge each other as such. Grandparents and Edmond be damned, they were a *family*.

So many ideas and possibilities suddenly swirled through Riley's head. They could take them all on such wonderful trips or watch some movies or…

They were getting ahead of themselves. They still needed to leave the island *and* actually take all of them in before any of that could happen.

Luna pulled away from everyone, prompting everyone to back off a bit.

"S-So… can we… leave now?"

"Are you ready to?" Riley asked.

"Y-Yeah…" Luna rubbed their eyes. "I t-think so."

"Alright. Jade?"

"Sure. We should go to the top and enjoy the view while we wait," Jade suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds nice," Jamie replied.

Riley put out their left hand to Jade, who took it after staring at it in confusion for a moment. They then put their other hand out to Luna, who quickly accepted without having to think about it. Luna put out their free hand to Jamie, who similarly accepted it quickly.

"Alright. Let's get off of this island."

Riley started to lead everyone up to the top but it seemed that something caught Jade's attention, evident by the fact that they tugged on Riley's arm a bit.

"What's the matter, Jade?" Riley asked.

"I could've sworn I saw the tip of some kind of bridge or something over there." They used their free hand to point towards the far-left side of the hill.

"A detour? This close to the end?"

"Yeah! Let's check it out!" Jamie added eagerly. Luna nodded in agreement.

Maybe it was selfish, but Riley was ready to stop. They've had enough with climbing for a long time, so they *really* didn't want to do more. However… Jamie and Luna seemed interested, so they decided against shutting that idea down. It wouldn't kill them to check out whatever Jade saw.

Riley sighed in defeat. "Okay, fine… lead the way, Jade."

Jade dragged everyone along the left side of the hill's base until they reached the end of the platform. Jade then pointed downwards towards what appeared to be a ruined bridge. "There."

Riley's eyes narrowed on the bridge, taking note of the distance between it and them. "That… seems like a pretty long drop. Are you sure it's worth checking out?"

"I mean… I've still got some rope if we wanna explore a bit?" Jamie suggested.

"Oh, right. I guess it wouldn't hurt then."

Jamie pulled out the spools of rope that they had in their bag; one unused and the other partially used. They first slung the used one down until it was completely unraveled and staked it in the ground.

Riley watched as Jamie slid down the rope and landed on a small platform just below them. They gave a thumbs-up, prompting the others to follow.

When they got down there, they noticed that the rope seemed to drop just far enough to be comfortably within arm's reach. How convenient.

"Perfect!" Jamie exclaimed. "Time for the next rope…"

Just like the first, the second rope spool reached down to yet another platform below them. Given that it was a little longer than the first, the end of it bundled up a bit on the ground.

They all once again slid down the rope and landed safely on the platform. All that was left between them and the bridge was… a natural, walkable, path down. *If only it was this easy the entire time…*

When they got down to the bridge, the first thing Riley noticed was a statue leaned up against the base of the hill. It seemed to be holding some strange gem but more importantly, it had four empty sockets for… something.

Wait… Myres had mentioned "four amulets" earlier… and this statue had four sockets… Was this statue the key to Nadir…?

Well, even if it was, it didn't really matter. They didn't have the amulets and it was far too late for them to backtrack. At least they knew for next time, assuming they actually stuck to their word and went back for Myres.

"I think this statue takes the amulets that Myres had mentioned, but since we don't have them…" Riley said.

"At least we know where to find it next time," Jamie replied.

"N-Next time…? And w-who's Myres…?" Luna asked.

Oh, right. Luna still wasn't aware of his existence. Riley had completely forgotten they'd kept him a secret from them.

"Uh…" Riley and Jamie stared at each other nervously. "He's, uh… or, well, *was* a scoutmaster. He crashed on this island a long time ago and died. Now, both his body and his ghost are stuck on this island."

“I-Is he the ghost I s-saw right b-before I fell asleep in the v-volcano…?”

“Most likely, yes. He did say he saw you. As for what Jamie meant by ‘next time,’ it’s…” Riley sighed. “Complicated. We’re gonna have to come back when we’re more prepared to rescue him.”

“Oh… okay.” Luna frowned.

“Well, if that’s all… I think we should get going,” Jade suggested. “I think we’ve learned everything we can from here.”

Everyone silently complied and started returning to the peak the same way they went down. Thankfully, that was a very easy task with all of the rope they had set down. It was a shame it couldn’t really be used anywhere else during their time on the island, but at least it could come in handy for once.

“Now… let’s actually get out of here,” Riley said.

Riley once again locked hands with Jade and Luna and lead everyone up to the top where they sat down around the flag. Luna and Jamie immediately laid down and gazed up at the sky in awe while Jade grabbed a flare from the box.

Jade stared at the flare for a moment before offering it to Luna. “You want to do the honors, Luna?”

“Oh! Uh, s-sure!”

Luna sat back up and carefully grabbed the flare from Jade. They then lit it and watched as orange smoke bellowed from it. They staked it down in the ground, taking care to not let it roll off or catch the surrounding grass on fire.

After a few minutes, they heard the faint sound of a helicopter buzzing in the distance. After a few more seconds, they saw the silhouette of a helicopter appear on the horizon. It appeared to be getting larger, which meant someone definitely saw the flare.

Which was a good thing, considering the flare just puffed its last little bit of smoke. Had that happened before the helicopter could spot them… well, at least they had more flares to try again.

“I-It’s a…”

“Helicopter!” Jamie gasped.

The helicopter was soon above them. Nobody in the helicopter said anything but they did drop a rope for the scouts to climb up.

Jamie went first followed by Luna then Jade. Riley didn’t climb it at first, opting to get one final look at the volcano they recently emerged from.

What they weren't expecting to see was Scoutmaster Myres' corpse—or what they now called Evil Myres—standing in the distance.

In spite of being evil, he still seemed to respect the fact that Riley managed to get everyone out alive. He saluted them and they instinctively saluted in return.

With a wicked smile on his face, he let his arm down and jumped back into the volcano, never to be seen again. *Weird…*

"YOU COMING OR WHAT!?" Jamie yelled over the sound of the helicopter's blades spinning.

Riley gave a thumbs-up in return. There was no point in trying to talk over the helicopter. They grabbed onto the rope and began their ascent into the helicopter.

They reached the top and scrambled into the cabin of the helicopter. They took their seat beside Luna who, as expected, fell asleep again. They gently moved Luna's head so it was resting on their shoulder. In response, Luna subconsciously leaned all of their weight on Riley.

Sitting across from them, Jade and Jamie were in a pretty similar position. Neither of them had fallen asleep yet, though it was clear that both were on the brink of it. They weren't entirely sure how Jamie was that close to sleep considering they were just calling out to them moments prior. At the same time though, they've also gone without sleep for a while, so…

"We were about t' leave you behind…" Jamie said, followed up by a yawn.

"You wouldn't."

"Yeah… whatever…" Jamie then drifted off to sleep.

"I guess I'll get some shut-eye too while we've got the chance to," Jade said.

"Good idea. Get some rest."

"You get some too, Riley."

"Don't gotta tell me twice."

Jade scoffed and close their eyes, falling asleep just as quickly as Jamie did.

The male co-pilot in the cockpit gave a thumbs-up and Riley gave one in response, which prompted him to give the female pilot a nod. Immediately after, the cabin doors closed and the helicopter started moving.

They'd probably be flying for a few hours, and nobody else was awake, so they figured they should actually follow Jade's advice and get some rest. Much like everyone else, they had gone without sleep for a while too, and they were going to need it to be able to deal with all of the noise at the airport.

For now, they felt at ease, allowing themselves to be dragged into the depths of unconsciousness. Their biggest problem at hand had been resolved and everyone was leaving alive and in good spirits. They couldn’t have asked for a better outcome.

However… there were still a few more problems waiting for them at the airport and beyond.

# Chapter 33: New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Violent shaking was the first sensation Riley felt as they were yanked out of a deep sleep. Their first thought was that they were crashing, which instantly instilled panic in them, even as they were quickly clawing out of the depths of their slumber.

However, once they were a little more awake, the helicopter didn't feel like it was actually crashing. Instead, it was the co-pilot who was shaking them. He didn't seem terribly concerned, so their next thought was that they were getting close to landing.

Regardless of the reason, that was quite the scare to be getting immediately after waking up. Their chest hurt and their blood pressure felt like it had skyrocketed through the roof. That was *not* a good feeling to have right after waking up. Or… well, in general, really.

"I apologize for frightening you like that, but we'll be landing in a few minutes."

"Okay… good to… know." Riley replied through heaved breathing.

"I'll leave you alone so you can calm down…" he said as he glanced over at the kids. "And I'll let you wake the little ones up yourself. I don't wanna spook them like I did you."

"Appreciate it…"

The co-pilot then silently returned to his seat beside the pilot. What the hell was his problem to be waking them up like that?

They needed some time to calm themselves down before they even thought about waking the kids up. If any of them saw that the adult in the group was panicked, that would one-hundred percent instill panic in them as well, which was the exact opposite of what any of them needed.

They scooted away from Luna just enough to be able to look outside the window. Thankfully, that proved to be an easy task since Luna had already stopped leaning on them at some point during their sleep.

It had gotten dark outside, evident by the fact the sun was gone, but they couldn't tell whether it had just turned night or if it'd be morning soon. Their watch had stopped functioning long ago, and there were no clocks in the cabin, so they couldn't really figure that out.

It didn't really matter though. The time wouldn't have made any difference. Whether it was day or night, the first thing they were doing when they could actually go home was crashing into their bed and falling asleep for a while. They needed it after everything, and they'd certainly need it even more after dealing with everyone and everything after landing.

They looked down and noticed the lights from the city below. There weren't many lights on given the time of night, but there were enough to make out shapes of buildings. Even in the dark, many of those shapes were familiar, and they could even identify some points of interest by their silhouettes.

As uninteresting as something like that would usually be to them, they still took great interest in it. After all, they'd been abandoned out in the wild for several days, so at the moment they reveled in any signs of civilization.

Then it hit them: they were close to home. They were safe. They were *free*.

Staring out the window did favors in helping them calm down. Their chest didn't really hurt anymore and it felt like their blood pressure had returned to a more normal rate. They hated feeling like that, so they were certainly glad that was over with.

With that rude awakening behind them, they figured it was now a good time to get the kids up. They were going to need to be ready to get going as soon as they landed. The quicker they could get somewhere quiet, the better.

However, once they turned around, they noticed that Luna had woken up on their own. That was a bit strange, given the kid seemed like such a heavy sleeper, but at least one of the three kids were taken care of.

"Hey Luna, we're going to be landing soon. I'm gonna go ahead and wake Jade and Jamie up, okay?" Riley whispered.

"Mmkay…" Luna groggily replied.

They had a feeling that Luna didn't really process any of that. The poor kid was still trying to wake up after all. Oh well. They'd probably come back around to them after getting Jade and Jamie up.

They approached Jade first, who they assumed they'd have better luck with. They reached out a hand to gently shake them but paused as they recalled not being happy about being woken up that way. However… the co-pilot was also a lot more rough, so…

They once again reached out to Jade and placed a hand on their shoulder. They gently shook them a couple times, to no avail. They then shook them ever so slightly harder, but not enough to cause any panic.

Fortunately, Jade seemed to start showing signs of life after that. They didn't say anything, instead just constantly looking around until their eyes landed on Jamie. Their eyes then met Riley's, seemingly slightly irritated by the fact they were woken up.

"Sorry. We're landing soon so I just need all of you awake for it."

Again, Jade didn't say anything. They did slowly nod in understanding but didn't do much else beyond that. They did, however, hold Jamie a little closer to them.

Riley assumed Jade would handle waking Jamie up, so they didn't pursue that idea any further. Jamie would probably be more positively receptive to it if Jade was the one to wake them up anyways.

That much was confirmed when Jade started rustling Jamie the same way Riley did to them. Jamie whined in protest and only held onto Jade tighter.

"C'mon, Jamie… we're leaving soon," Jade said.

"I don't wanna…" Jamie whined.

"I know…" Jade seemed… sad? "But we have to."

"Why…?"

Jade didn't respond.

"Why?" Jamie asked again.

"I… don't know."

Neither of the siblings said anything beyond that. There wasn't anything that could be said that could make it any better. They both knew very well they were returning to a life they didn't want to return to, and neither of them could do anything about it.

Luna left their seat and squeezed themselves between Jamie and the wall. However, neither of them seemed to mind. They then wrapped Jamie in a half-hug and placed their free hand atop Jamie's. Jamie turned that hand so they could interlock.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could've done more for you three," Riley reluctantly stated.

It *hurt* to say that. It *hurt* to acknowledge they realistically couldn't do much. It *hurt* to let them all go back to lives they didn't want to go back to. It *hurt*…

"You've done more than any of us could've asked for," Jade replied.

"But…"

"You weren't obligated to help us when we crashed. You weren't obligated to form such a bond with us so we could work together and leave. You weren't obligated to rescue Luna with us. You weren't obligated to do *anything* with or for us, and yet you did."

"I…"

"And who knows what will happen at the airport?"

"…"

"Just… try to think more positively of yourself… of everything, okay?"

"It's hard to when the negatives heavily outweigh the positives."

“I… suppose I’ve never really looked at it like that before.”

Riley didn’t really want to continue the conversation so they stopped talking there. Wallowing in their guilt wouldn’t make things better. They should be *happy* for crying out loud! They were going home!

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to strike a nerve.” Jade then slouched back a bit in their seat and focused on Jamie and Luna again. That… did nothing to make Riley feel better.

Riley once again looked outside the window, but in that time, the lights and shapes from the city had been replaced by runway lights and vague silhouettes of planes.

They were at the airport. The end of the line with these kids.

“Looks like we’re here,” Riley sighed. They weren’t ready to do this, but they didn’t exactly have a choice.

They watched as they slowly descended closer to the ground. They couldn’t see any people from their window but they knew better than to think it was going to be quiet there. This wasn’t something that could just be swept under the rug.

They felt a slight bounce as the helicopter landed on the ground. Once secure on the ground, all of the mechanical whirring inside stopped and the blades on the outside slowed to a halt. However, the silence that followed was a little too eerie for their liking.

That was, until the co-pilot once again entered the cabin. “Morning, folks. As you may have guessed, we’ve just landed. Me and the pilot, Judy, will help you all get out shortly.”

“And your name is…?” Riley asked.

“Todd.” Todd then put out his hand to shake Riley’s, but Riley didn’t return the gesture. “Ah… tough crowd.”

“Sorry. Not really in the mood for formalities. Name’s Riley, by the way.”

“I’m aware. News about all of your disappearances spread quickly.”

“It has?”

“Yeah. I’d expect a lot of paparazzi waiting for you out there… and some friends too.”

“Any family?”

“Hmm… not that I can tell. At least, nobody identified themselves as family members.”

“Todd!” A woman, presumably Judy, called out from outside, muffled by the glass.

“Ah… guess it’s time for me to go. I’ll chat with you later if you’d like.”

*I wouldn’t like that, actually… What I would like is some peace and quiet…*

“Sure. See you around, Todd,” Riley replied listlessly.

“Likewise.” Todd then exited the helicopter, leaving the four scouts alone.

Before any of them could do anything though, the cabin door suddenly swung open.

In the forefront stood Judy with her hands on her hips. She seemed quite annoyed, but for what reason, they were uncertain of. They assumed they wouldn’t ever figure out why, so the next best thing was to just simply avoid confrontation. They *really* didn’t need any drama now.

Behind her was the paparazzi behind held back by two police officers and a flimsy fence. The crowd could’ve easily plowed through that “blockade,” but it somehow managed to keep them at bay. They all had their own camera crews and microphones, so clearly they were there to probe for attention.

They were really hoping they could just avoid all of that noise. They didn’t want to have to deal with the media, and they certainly didn’t want the kids to have to deal with them either. Maybe they’d come back around to the idea in the future, but now…?

“Get moving, people!” Judy urged. *Jeez, these pilots are just total pricks, aren’t they…?*

Riley reluctantly complied and walked out of the cabin. The children piled out behind them. It felt good to be on stable ground again, even if their feet were still sore.

They didn’t get much time to take it all in though because they were nearly tackled by someone in a hug.

“Holy sh—crap, you’re *alive*, Riley!” a female exclaimed. *That voice sounds familiar…*

It wasn’t until she backed off that they noticed it was their best friend, Evelyn. Or Eve, for short. Only they could call her that though.

Her skin was lime-green and she wore a galaxy sash. Much like Riley, she had almost every badge aside from a few of the most difficult or time-consuming ones. She had a scar over her left eye, which truthfully came from an encounter from her cat, even if she tried to hype it up as something cooler. Her outfit was the regular scouting outfit but in the Cookie Scout color scheme. Her shirt was white with green accents. Her skirt and shoes were the same green as the accents on her shirt.

Her hair seemed a little messier than usual. She usually had it wrapped up in a ponytail, but instead, it draped to her shoulders. However, given the time and given they were a mess themselves, they decided against teasing her for it.

Based on the fact there were a lot of people both on the runway and in the airport, it seemed she took their advice and made some noise when they went missing.

They had no reason to believe she wouldn’t have done so but… she was forgetful at times. That much was understandable given she was busy training to become a Scoutmaster but it would’ve been rather unfortunate if that was one of the times she forgot.

Wait…

A *galaxy sash*? That means she's already a Scoutmaster? But how…?

"Hey, Eve…"

"Morning, sunshine! How are you feeling?"

"Tired, hungry, thirsty, dirty… but I'm alive."

"I guess that's to be expected," Evelyn said. "Oh hey! Check it out!" She tugged on her sash. "I'm a Scoutmaster now!"

"I noticed. Why's that? I thought you were still training?"

"Yeah… long story."

"I've got plenty of time."

"Do it somewhere else. You need to clear the area," Judy flatly stated. *Right… she's still here…*

Evelyn glared at Judy. "Jeez, okay. We're moving." She then put out a hand, which Riley grabbed immediately. "Let's get you and the little ones somewhere quieter."

*I'm glad I'm not the only one that has a problem with Judy…*

"I'm not little…" Jamie refuted.

"Whatever you say, Jamie."

"You… know them?" Riley asked.

"Uh… yeah? Duh? Maybe if you didn't sit around and hide from people, you would've met them sooner too!"

Riley rolled their eyes. "Whatever. Let's get out of here."

Evelyn smirked. "Sure."

Evelyn then led all of them to a hatch leading back into the airport. *More climbing…?* She entered first, then the children right after her. It was only after everyone else had entered that Riley finally climbed up.

Thankfully, the airport was much quieter than the runway. There were still a few people inside, many of which tried to approach the group as they entered, but Evelyn shooed them off.

It was only then that they finally saw a clock with the date and time: June 11$^{th}$. 5:57AM.

They were gone for *an entire week*. At least they got a full night's rest on their way back.

“Well… I guess it’s not really a *long* story necessarily… just… I dunno.” Evelyn motioned towards a set of seats. “Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll go find some food and drinks for all of you.”

The four of them complied and sat down in their seats. Immediately, they noticed the seats were much more comfortable than those in the helicopter. That wasn’t a necessarily high bar to clear but they still appreciated it nonetheless.

Evelyn quickly returned with four bottles of water and bags of chips. “Sorry. I know it’s not much but not many places around here are open yet. This stupid airport only has vending machines…”

“It’s fine. I appreciate it, Eve.” Riley then took a bottle and bag and dug into it.

The chips were bland, and truthfully almost stale, but it was better than nothing. And… they couldn’t even recall the last time they had something to drink aside from coconut water, so they were glad they could have actual water again.

Evelyn then sat down across from them and sighed. “So… a lot has happened in the time you’ve all been missing.”

“We’re a pretty big deal, huh?” Jamie asked sarcastically.

“Yup, totally, kid,” Evelyn replied in a similar manner.

“So, uh, anyways. After I started making calls, rumors of Scoutmaster Edmond’s involvement started to circulate.”

“You don’t say,” Riley scoffed.

Evelyn seemed confused at the remark, but paid no further attention to it. “Long story short, turns out he was trying to kill that kid.” She then pointed directly at Luna, who shrunk in their seat. “Apparently, before that, he treated them like crap too, like—”

“Yeah… we’re aware,” Riley said.

Evelyn’s brow furrowed. “You… are?”

“Yeah. Hey, Jade, you still got that note?”

“Hmm… let me check.” Jade then set down their water and snack and dug into their backpack. They soon pulled out Riley’s coat and dug around in the pockets. They found the note from Edmond and handed it to Evelyn. “Here’s the note we found on the pilot’s corpse.”

Evelyn took the note. “Pilot’s corpse…? You’re saying…”

“The pilot died by the time we found them, yes,” Jade replied.

“Huh… okay.” Evelyn then scanned the note and grimaced. “Yeah. This is the exact same note that we found in his office… What the hell…”

“So… what happened to him after all that?” Jamie asked.

“Given that he bribed the pilot to try to kill the kid and the fact that there were four of you on that flight… he’s currently looking at one count of bribery and four counts of attempted murder. So, uh… he’s probably not coming back for a while. Or ever.”

“And that’s why you’re Scoutmaster now?”

“Yeah. They needed someone to take his place and it seemed like I was the only person that could take on that mantle, so now I’m Scoutmaster of that kid’s troop.”

“Luna,” Luna flatly said.

“Huh?”

“M-My name is Luna…”

“Oh. I thought your name was…” Evelyn shook her head. “Nevermind. Guessing that’s the name you prefer?” Luna nodded in response. “’kay, noted. Nice to finally meet you, Luna.”

“So… Edmond’s out of the picture… what about these two’s grandparents?” Riley pointed towards Jade and Jamie.

“Those old hags—”

“Watch it,” Riley warned.

“Those old folks? Haven’t seen ‘em. I did hear quite the commotion from them about… something, I dunno. Didn’t quite catch any of it.”

“So I guess that means they’re with me then.”

“I guess so. Seems like today’s your lucky day!”

“Works for me. That’s kinda what we all prefer anyways.”

“If I was in their shoes… I would too, honestly,” Evelyn’s eyes widened as she remembered something. “Oh, yeah! We’ve got a few Headmasters here too but I think you’ll have more important problems with—”

Suddenly, a man in blue jeans and a dress shirt appeared in Riley’s line-of-sight. He was holding what appeared to be a clipboard in one hand. In spite of the time, he seemed ready for… whatever he was there for. They couldn’t quite pinpoint who or what he was there for.

Well, at least, that was until they saw the letters “CPS” on his shirt. That meeting could only go one of two ways then, one of which made their stomach drop.

“Him. Lemme… get out of your hair now. I’ll catch up with you later, ‘kay Riley?”

“Sure. See you around, Eve.”

The man then sat down where Evelyn previously sat. “I apologize for breaking up your re-union, Riley. I assume you remember who I am?”

It only now registered in their head that he was Dave. The agent they had dealt with before both in fostering and having Melody, their previous foster child, taken from them. They… couldn’t bear to think about her again.

“Dave, yeah… You here to take these three from me too?”

“Hmm… not quite,” Dave replied.

“Huh?”

“These are… very extraordinary circumstances, Riley.”

“Elaborate.”

“Well, first of all, the guardian for Amber—”

“Luna.” *Was Amber their real name…? Luna flinched when they heard it so… hopefully not… Regardless, they’re Luna to me.*

“The guardian for *Luna* tried to kill them and got arrested, so he’s no longer got custody of them. Second of all, the grandparents of Jade and Jamie decided to expedite surrendering custody of them for… some reason. Third of all, from what I can tell, it seems they really like you and finally, we don’t really have anywhere to hold them at the moment, so…”

“You’re saying that they’re mine?”

“Well… not quite, no. I *am* saying that you can keep them for the day, but we’ll need to get some paperwork done tomorrow if you really want to take them in. That’s the soonest I’ll be able to see you,” Dave smiled. “You seem like a good person, and last time I was at your place it was in great shape, so I assume you’ll be able to handle these three for the day at the very least.”

“Alright!!!” Jamie exclaimed.

“You, uh… heard him, right Jamie? You’re not *actually* my kid yet,” Riley replied.

“Who cares! Even if we’re just with you for a day, it’s better than… uh, wherever we’d end up.”

Riley sighed. “I guess so.” They then smiled. “So… Dave. Is it really that easy?”

“Well… assuming everything goes well tomorrow and nobody has second thoughts… sure. You’ll be able to foster them soon enough.”

“That’s… hah. *Incredible*. That’s exactly what we want.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” He offered a hand for them to shake, but they hugged him instead. Surprisingly, he did return the hug.

Riley suddenly backed off, embarrassed by the act. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that.”

“I get it, emotions are high. I’ve seen it plenty of times. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m just… wow! I didn’t think… I thought this would end much differently.”

“Well… like I said, extraordinary circumstances. If even one of those factors were absent… Well, it doesn’t matter now.” He then pulled a paper from his clipboard and offered it to Riley. “Here’s the court order saying what I said, basically. I strongly suggest you hold onto it.”

Riley took the paper but didn’t bother to read it at the moment. Their mind was too all over the place to process it anyhow. They instead folded it up and shoved it in their right pocket.

“With all of that out of the way… I’ll leave you all to it.” He then started to walk away.

Riley patted their pocket where there phone would usually be but noticed it was gone. “Dave, wait!” they called out.

“Hm?”

“I don’t have a working phone right now. What time do you want us to come in tomorrow?”

“Let’s see…” Dave tapped on his phone, presumably looking for an opening. “Uh… 2PM?”

“Sure,” Riley agreed. The kids nodded in unison. “Works for us.”

“Wonderful. I’ll see you all then.” Dave waved and continued walking away.

It was only then that Riley noticed Evelyn was close-by. “Gee, didn’t take you as an eavesdropper, Eve.”

“Congrats, Riley.”

“I’m not their parent yet.”

“*Yet*. I have a good feeling that will change.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me.”

“Someone’s gotta be confident in you.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

Evelyn scoffed. “You know *exactly* what I mean, Rye.”

“I hate it when you call me that.”

“I *love* it.”

Evelyn broke out into laughter, causing Riley to follow suit. As much of a pain in the ass she could be at times, she was still a great friend to them. They couldn’t ever truly hate her.

Jamie cleared their throat. “Ahem.”

“Huh?” Riley turned around and was tackled in a hug by all of the kids.

“Aww. Seems like they love you!” Evelyn cooed.

“Yeah! We do! They’re super cool!” Jamie replied.

“Sounds about right,” Evelyn replied warmly. “I’ll leave you all to it then. I’ll be waiting in my car.”

“Huh? But I have mine—”

“You got your car keys? Or… *any* keys, as a matter of fact?”

“Uh…” Riley patted their pockets then realized all of their keys were missing too. “No… You have the spare key to my place, right?”

Evelyn waved the spare key around. “Yup, I sure do. Please give me another when you can replace yours.” She then handed it over to Riley. “Like I said, I’ll be waiting in my car. I’ll give you all a ride back to your place as long as you let me crash on your couch.”

Riley shrugged. “Sure, works for me. What about my car?”

“I’ll have my dad tow it, free of charge.”

“I’ll pay you for it—”

“No you won’t.”

“But—”

“Blah blah blah! I can’t hear you! I’m leaving now!!!” Evelyn then ran off towards the exit of the airport before Riley had a chance to argue any longer.

“Heh. Rye…” Jamie muttered.

“Jamie… don’t even.”

Jamie put their hands up. “Okay, okay! Jeez…”

“So… other than tomorrow, that’s it then? It was really that simple?” Jade asked.

“I guess so. I’m glad it was that easy though.”

“Y-Yeah… I didn’t w-wanna go back…”

Jamie nodded. “None of us did, but look at us now! We get to hang out forever!!!” they shouted.

Riley caught a glance of the crowd that was slowly growing larger. It seemed their window to escape was narrowing.

“I think we should get going. More people keep coming in and I don’t really want any of us to be bothered right now.”

“Aww, okay,” Jamie whined. It seemed they had their eyes set on the rock-climbing pillar.

“I’m sorry Jamie, but we’ve all gotta get showered and in some clean clothes and I’ve gotta figure out food and a lot of other stuff for us. You’ll have time to lounge around back at my house, okay?”

“Fine…” Jamie grumbled. “Let’s leave then.”

Riley let out a deep sigh. They weren’t ready for all that noise, but they needed to get out of there. “Alright… let’s do this.”

And then they set off towards the exit. They ignored all of the paparazzi as they walked by and gently pushed the kids onward every time they stopped. The sooner they could leave, the better.

They finally made it outside to Evelyn’s car. It was a shoddy looking van, but at least it’d comfortably fit all of them.

“Shotgun,” Riley said.

“Dang it…” Jamie whined.

Riley sat down in the front seat while their children scrambled into the back seat. Once all four of them were buckled in, Evelyn turned on the car.

“Well, how do you feel, Riley?” Evelyn asked.

“Nervous? But also… happy? For several reasons.”

“Makes sense. You’ve got nothing to worry about though! I’ve got your back and so do they.”

“Yeah… you’re right. I appreciate everything you’ve been doing, Eve.”

“Anything for my bestie!” she chirped.

Evelyn then turned on the car and started driving. Riley caught a quick glance in the rear-view mirror and noticed the kids had somehow fallen asleep again. They couldn’t help but smile at the sight. They were finally safe, and as long as Riley was alive, they’d do *anything* to ensure their safety.

They weren’t really tired themselves, nor were they in the mood to talk anymore, so they instead opted to just watch the scenery as it passed by them. They never really got the opportunity to do a lot of sightseeing before, considering they were usually the one driving.

Most of the smaller businesses were still closed but some were just starting to open up. Life was starting to poor into the city too as the morning people started making their commutes. The street lights were still on, though they imagined that’d change soon with hints of the sun creeping up towards the horizon.

After a few minutes, the sun finally peeked up over the horizon, shining a nice orange-golden hue on everything it touched. It was truly a pretty sight. They made a mental note to watch the sunrise more often.

For the first time in a while, they too felt at peace. They were safe and they finally had a new purpose in life again.

Fulfilling that purpose would be far from the easiest thing they’ve ever done. They were certainly nervous to be taking on such a massive undertaking too. However, with their best friend and their new family cheering them on…

They were ready to carve out a new path in life, both for themselves and their kids.

*No matter what.*

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Okay so I just realized I lied about Chapter 18 being the longest chapter, considering this chapter was 4,631 words long. I think I just tried to fluff it up as much as I could to squeeze out 100k words in total, which in retrospect, is cringe. Just let it happen naturally ffs

End Notes

Hi new friends! I'm just mirroring the fanfiction I've posted on AO3 to here while it's down. Hoping to be able to use this as a secondary place to access my fics in the event that AO3 goes down for as long as it does again.

Please let me know if the etiquette for tagging/writing stuff like this is any different here so I can adjust. While I am an AO3 refugee, I do want to respect the people here too.

Feel free to join my Discord server to keep up with updates and discussions of my fics! I do stuff on Tumblr too, but you may have an easier time reaching me on Discord.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!