

How excited Sander was to have such an opportunity in front of him! To be able to explore the deepest regions of the dark and steamy jungle (in a highly controlled tour group); to see fauna and flora that friends could only see in pictures (from a tourist company-approved safe distance); even perhaps getting a chance to happen upon some of the greatest natural phenomena in the world, that boggled the mind and defied explanation (which Deep Jungle Adventure, Inc. had not guaranteed existed). The rabbit loved to travel, and always wanted to see the world. So with his timely Christmas work bonus, and an expert sniping of a deal off www.travel.com, why not start with the jungles of Asia?

That, however, was about two weeks ago. The excitement of flying across the globe, seeing a faraway place and taking the sights of a new country were now quickly evaporating as nervous footsteps crushed the underbrush beneath them with reckless abandon. The rabbit, who panted with curious excitement as he flitted about the jungle path no less than an hour ago, felt his breath catch in his chest for a different reason. Fear held his lungs in a vice grip, and as the jungle became increasingly darker and less familiar, even his screams of help fell piteously short.

He had run about in circles for the past half an hour or so, trying desperately to find the path he kept telling himself he was on just minutes ago. It had to be somewhere around here, he just saw it. And it all looked so familiar, so surely he hadn't strayed too far. There, he saw that flower before, and that big scarred tree trunk too, hadn't he? So surely someone must hear him.

"Help, please, someone! It's me, Sander, I got separated! I'm over here, I know you guys have to hear this!"

But after the twelfth time of shouting that at the top of his lungs, reality finally began to sink in. For even after walking in a straight line for five minutes, it all still looked familiar. With no path all he could see was trees; trees in every direction, with leaves that almost entirely blotted out the sun, and so many different vines and bushes and other undergrowth so numerous along the ground that trying to discern one patch of land from another was impossible. He was lost—No, he was starting to get the feeling that he was doomed.

Still he walked, though his steps were slow and mechanical. Any hope of finding the group or the path had completely diminished. Rather than looking left and right, eyes darting to and fro for some kind of landmark, his head hung in front of him, barely registering the ground that shifted with his sullen march. That's how a vine found such easy purchase around his foot, and in seconds the rabbit was face first against the base of a particularly large tree, shouting and screaming into the wood as he slammed his fists petulantly against the bark. Having already resigned himself to the notion that this was the end, he released all of his rage out against the innocent tree. Angry at himself for leaving the path to take a picture of the tree, angry for losing the path so easily, angry for coming in the first place, and so forth.

As he loosed curse upon curse on the undeserving tree, his fists moved with less energy, and his voice turned from loud and haggard to a weak whimper. Sander was sure this was the end, and was now wishing more than anything that sleep would simply take him out of the nightmare reality had become.

However, as he was wishing for rest, another creature above him had just finished enjoying his own. A snake, long and thick, rested upon a particularly large branch high

above the rabbit, woken from his slumber by the shouts and vibrations echoing up his tree. Though the snake's purple body was getting hard to see as the sun set, great yellow eyes appeared as his eyelids rose, beacons in the jungle twilight. Smacking his large scaled lips together, the snake rose his large head up from his pile of coils and looked about for the location of the disturbance. The snake's eyes widened and the last of his sleepiness left him when he got a good look at the creature below him, surprised to see such a thing alone in the jungle. The snake had seen a few before, but only in the large groups of people that sometimes stomped loudly through the path in the middle. He licked his serpentine lips, relishing such a lucky opportunity, but his bubble was burst almost immediately. He got so caught up in seeing such easy prey that he forgot that he wasn't actually hungry at all. And for that matter, as he recalled these creatures just did not taste good. So what could he do? This was not the best kind of meal, or time for one either, but to let him go like this would be downright silly. And if he didn't take advantage soon, someone else here would!

The snake found himself in quite a pickle, and was almost wondering if he should just eat up the rabbit anyway, even if he'd likely regret the overly full feelings and taste of civilization on him. And that's when he remembered something deep in the jungle. A place most animals stayed away from, a pool whose waters did not quench thirst, but instead changed them entirely. The change was regarded as random by most animals, but the snake had been lucky enough to know better. He had seen a small flying squirrel with a broken leg attempting to outrun another snake months earlier, and knowing that it was the pool or death, the squirrel jumped into the pool. The snake was annoyed by the squirrel's suicide tactic, turning himself around to slither away and find another meal. His slithering went from pouty to terrified in a right hurry though, because soon a leopard erupted from the pool, and he had to do his best to get away from the prey-turned-predator. The great purple python had no idea whether he got away or not, but he didn't care. For now in the present he was grinning a wicked smile only a snake could really pull off, and lowering himself slowly in front of the sobbing rabbit.

"Hello, is sssomething wrong little one?" The snake said, not holding back the hissing in the slightest. He found it relaxed the other animals for some reason, and it had an almost immediately visible effect upon the rabbit, who shivered, and slumped against the tree.

After the initial shock and hiss wore off, the rabbit ears perked up, and he whirled around. Oh thank goodness, someone found him, he wasn't doomed, he wasn't going to die, thank everything--! Sander's face fell instantly upon seeing the great grinning snake in front of him, his voice faltering and his body freezing like stone.

"Were you expecting sssomeone else?" the snake said with curiosity, his huge eyes getting bigger as he raised his brow inquisitively. The snake seemed to get closer by the second, until all the terrified rabbit could see were his huge, glowing eyes. The rabbit simply nodded.

"Ahhh, I sssee. Well, perhaps I could help you out. You seem to be lost, little one. Do you need help getting back to the others?"

Sander was still terrified, of course. Why wouldn't he be? A snake, whose head was almost as big as his upper body, loomed in front of him, with eyes so big they were all he could see. It was a scary situation, and Sander was surprised he hadn't just been squeezed to death and eaten by now. But eventually the snake's words reached the

addled rabbit's brain, and Sander stopped praying to a god he stopped believing in long ago for salvation. Did the snake just ask if he could offer the rabbit some assistance? That he said he knows how to get him back to civilization, and would help him find it? Was this too good to be true? Was he dreaming?

"Yes, then?" the snake said, trying to ignore the fact that the rabbit just yelped from pinching himself. His tailtip slid down and grabbed the bottom half of Sander's chin, making him nod up and down for him, since he was obviously preoccupied being crazy.

"Excellent. Follow me then, little rabbit."

Sander was not yet convinced he wasn't still dreaming, even if his arm now hurt like hell. It all seemed so crazy and impossible; the snake that was piling dozens of feet of coils in front of him, could not only speak, but was going to help him find his way back? This was all too... Well "too good to be true" doesn't seem to really fit, but it was something all right.

"Let'sss go," the snake said, snapping the rabbit out of his daze. He wasn't sure why he had spaced out like that, especially when he was so confused and scared just a moment ago, but he nodded and stood up, sniffing one last time and dusting himself off. Confident that the rabbit would now stick close behind, the snake slid from the top of the pile of his own coils, and slithered into the jungle.

At first, Sander was afraid that he'd lose the snake, for his body was a deep purple, and it was rapidly getting dark. Not so though, for even though the snake slid silently through the underbrush of the jungle, he seemed to constantly hiss. Almost like notes to a song, he would hiss for a few moments, drawing Sander's ears in his direction, the rabbit never losing sight of the snake for more than a few moments. It was funny, even though the snake was only hissing, it felt like he was saying something. The rabbit wasn't sure what though, and after straining his ears a couple of times to figure it out (but to no avail), he just shrugged and used the long, drawn-out hisses to keep close.

Sander's suspicions were interrupted quite suddenly by an intense feeling of fatigue. He wasn't sure what happened or where it came from so suddenly, but it felt like a sudden weight was bearing down upon him, the heat of the jungle cooking his flesh. He felt weak, he was sweating like a pig—He just barely caught himself against a tree, and was panting as if he just ran a mile.

"Is everything alright?" The great purple python's voice pierced through the haze that the heat created in his mind. The rabbit lifted his head up, staring into those big yellow eyes, which had an expression of great concern.

"So... Hot..." Sander was barely able to pant out, his knees shaking now.

"Well it's no wonder," the snake said with a knowing tone, his tailtip sliding into view, "with this heavy thing around your neck." The tail tip slid under the strap that held Sander's camera around his neck, gently lifting the thing off and holding it in front of him.

Sander was going to protest the snake taking his camera off him, and reprimand him for holding such an expensive piece of equipment so casually, but the instant it was no longer around his neck, he felt infinitely better. The choking heat that pressed so heavily upon him disappeared in an instant, and he could move easily once again. Which turned righteous indignation into simple concern just as quickly.

"But I can't just leave it here," Sander began, reaching up towards the camera the snake held just out of reach.

"Of coursse not," the snake said, gingerly setting the camera in the crook of a very large tree, about ten feet off the ground.

"Here it will sssit, safe and sound," the rabbit shivered as the snake's overly sibilant voice threaded into his ears and around his brain, "where I will help you retrieve it when you need to. What's important now is getting you where you belong, isn't it?"

Even though he was trying to hide it, incredulity must have been written all over the rabbit's face. Sander didn't want to leave his camera out here in the jungle, defenseless and alone. After all, it was one of his prized possessions, and how could he be so sure they'd be able to find it again tomorrow? It just seemed so unlikely, everything looked the same in this sea of green. Sander realigned his gaze with the snake's, about to voice his concern. He took a big breath, and then let it out, words wasted on his relaxed sigh. Another deep breath in, ready to say something... But rather than pipe up about his precious camera, his breath left him slowly and easily again, gaze fixed on the python's eyes.

"Let's move on little one. It's getting late, and you must be ssso ssssleppy." The snake turned away, and the rabbit shook himself out of his spacey state once more. Lucky thing too, as the snake's purple tail was beginning to slide into a bush, and the rabbit had to trot to catch up.

Sander's fear about his camera left him quickly. It felt less like something precious and more like a weight that he shed the further he got away from it, and the few more times the subject entered his mind, he convinced himself (and much more easily than he should have been able to) that the snake would help him find it again. Now was not the time to focus on cameras. Now was the time to get himself back where he belonged, civilization, and it was almost completely pitch black now. The only way he could find his way around was by the constant hissing that came from the snake far ahead of him, and Sander was thankful that the snake was taking such a precaution to keep him close.

"Why is he being so nice to me?" Sander asked under his breath. It was a feeling that had been gnawing at him since the beginning of their journey, and it was a question he could avoid no longer. Was the snake trying to get something out of him? The big reptile would have just eaten him by now if that was the plan, right? Sander could not for the life of him find an answer to this question. And the more it rolled around in his head, the closer he came to asking the snake. It was on the verge of his lips for a moment, in fact. But it would have to wait. The question left him in the form of another terrible gasp for air, the rabbit stabilizing himself against a tree with what little energy he had left. The heat, my god, the heat! It weighed upon him again, pressing from all sides. He felt soaked with sweat in moments, and that only weighed him down further. His legs were shaking with the strain of holding him up once again, and he thought he was going to simply collapse against the ground.

"Feeling tired again, Sssander?" The snake broke the fog once more, keeping the rabbit from collapsing into unconsciousness. Something bugged Sander about what the snake just said. Something didn't mesh right. But this suspicion left as quickly as it came when the tip of the snake's tail lifted up the rabbit's head, causing Sander to look the snake in the eyes.

"The problem is obvious," the snake said in an almost parental, know-it-all tone, "this is quite unnecesssary." The snake lowered the tip of his tail now, and dragged it across Sander's front, the addled rabbit eventually realizing that the reptile meant his shirt. This

didn't seem right either, for how could his shirt, something that couldn't even weigh a pound, be weighing him down this much? The snake was out of his mind. Sander didn't have the strength to stop the snake as he slid his tail under the rim of his shirt though, and even despite his misgivings he lifted his arms as the purple python pushed the shirt of over his head.

"Oooooohhh..." Sander's mouth widened into the biggest smile it ever had before. The relief was immediate and intense, and on so many levels too. True, he still felt a bit dirty, and yes, he wasn't where he belonged yet, but the heat, the weight, the stress—It all seemed to melt away immediately as his bare fur was caressed by the cool air of the jungle night.

"See? That's ssso much better isn't it? And you needn't worry, there's no shame here in the jungle, things like thisss don't belong anyway." The shirt, rather than carefully tucked in a safe place like the camera before it, was instead haphazardly laid across a branch. But no protest came from the rabbit's mouth. In fact, Sander didn't give it a second thought. It just felt so good to be free of the shirt, and besides, they'd come back and get it tomorrow just like the camera, wouldn't they? What was most important now was getting where he belonged, and the snake would lead him there.

Like he was looking into a serpentine mirror, Sander saw his own big smile reflected back at him, though with one key difference. This smile had a dark intent to it that the snake made no attempt to mask, because the relief that poured over the rabbit blinded him to it completely. The snake looked so happy to see him happy. Sander was glad he had found this snake. He was glad the snake was helping him to where he belonged. The snake knew where Sander belonged, that was clear. The snake would help him to find it.

"Come along Sander," came a soft voice, sibilant as ever. The rabbit shivered, and noticed that the snake's eyes had left his vision. He looked to and fro, confused for a moment, before he noticed movement just below him, the snake's tail sliding away. He began to stumble after as quickly as he could.

As if drunk, Sander stumbled through the jungle, though strangle enough he felt more sure of his path than ever. The hiss never left his ears; it showed him the way, and droned out all of those pointless other noises. He could hardly even hear himself think, but that was alright. It was more important to focus on following the snake right now anyway.

The moonlight helped. Sander didn't know how the moon came out and got so high above them so quickly, since they'd only been traveling about a half an hour or so by his measure. He was nevertheless thankful for it, for though he would never lose his reptilian guide for even a moment because of the long, droning hiss, moonbeams pushed through the canopy now. The jungle was beginning to thin slightly, and Sander was happy it did. That meant that his wobbly, shifting steps still found easy purchase, and now he could fully see the snake that had been so kind to him.

It was a pattern Sander had never seen before. So unique and downright strange were the spirals that went in a line down the snake's back. A great purple python, with an even deeper purple swirl pattern moving down his back, his scales shining beautifully as he slithered through patches of moonlight. Even stranger still, was the way it all seemed to move. The rabbit squinted and began to stare exclusively at the snake's back, trying to figure out how it moved the way it did. Was it a trick of the light, or the way he

slithered, or was the rabbit just that tired? He wasn't sure, but no matter how Sander stared at any particular portion of the snake's back, the spirals seemed to shift inward, drawing his gaze forth. Just like the hiss, drawing those flopping ears forward. The snake, drawing the lost rabbit forward, into his grasp. That thought, it struck Sander for a moment, like a slap to the face. He stopped following the slithering guide and looked about, looking like he was waking from a dream. Something was wrong, and he knew it, even if that droning hiss was getting louder, and louder.

The problem must have been the heat. Just as he began to shiver himself into what felt like awareness (for reasons he soon forgot), the heat was on top of him once again. It was stronger than ever, and almost caused fear to grip the rabbit. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he couldn't stand up! The sweat felt like it was boiling off of him, but the humidity was somehow so thick he felt like he was drowning. Black stars appeared over his vision, mouth gasping for air. He was falling now, body beginning to give way. He had come so far, and still didn't make it. He had failed, this place would be the end.

"Got you," said a far away voice, pressure suddenly upon the rabbit's chest. With the rest of his body limp, Sander opened his eyes, and saw the snake catch him in a thick coil, holding him up.

"You worried me for a sssecond," the snake hissed, moving his head up, and nudging the rabbit's lolling head with his large snout, "but I know the problem. This doesn't belong."

The snake's tail moved with great dexterity, getting in between his pants' waist and his stomach. Though he could not undo the button, the snake just gave them a quick yank (thankfully, the rabbit bordering on unconsciousness hardly felt a thing), and the pants fell to Sander's ankles. Then by simply lifting the rabbit a foot off the ground, they slipped off his feet onto the jungle floor.

Sander could not put into words the effect this had on him. It felt so good, so right. Like it was meant to be. That of course sounded like a hyperbole to most, but to him, it was the only thing that could even come close to the rush of comfort the jungle air had on his bare legs. Pain was gone, stress was nonexistent. He just felt pure, physical and mental bliss now, and that dumb smile had returned to his face. The rabbit moved his flopped ears out of the way, to get a better look at his savior.

"Time to go where you belong," the snake said, putting the tip of his tail on the rabbit's snout, silencing him before he could say thank you. If the jungle air itself felt wonderful on his body, then the scales were the icing on the cake. Sander even went so far as to push into the sleek scales, and snort happily like a wild beast. The snake just laughed at this, and put the rabbit down, letting the punch-drunk mammal hold himself up. The tail tip now indicated for the rabbit to follow him, and Sander did without question. Pants were long forgotten now, he wouldn't need those. He was going where he belonged.

The spirals shifted and danced in his vision, the moonlight causing them to shimmer so beautifully. Sander didn't even hear the hiss anymore. The droning, sibilant note had bore itself so deeply into his brain that it was now just a leash with which to keep him close. He stumbled, but somewhere, in the depths of the rabbit mind that still remained, he knew why. He was moving to the lovely rhythm the snake's body created, dancing with the snake as it guided him where he belonged. After all, this was a happy journey. It felt so good, felt so right. Thank goodness he had happened upon this snake, so kind, so caring. If not he may have been lost forever. Never able to find where he belonged.

They stopped, in sync this time. The rabbit just stared at the snake's back, still entranced even as it sat still in front of him. That tail tip wrapped around Sander's chin like a loving hand, tilting it up, and the rabbit's swimming vision saw what looked like a black mirror staring back at him. No words were exchanged, but the rabbit knew. This is where he belonged. They had gotten here at last. His eyes got wide, if no less glassy, and he pushed forward to where the snake showed him that he belonged, but he was stopped by the powerful coil of the snake.

Sander went stock still, not sure why the snake had stopped him, but he knew it must be important. He had helped him this far, the snake obviously knew what was best for him. Suddenly, pressure around his waist. The rabbit's head bobbed down, and he saw some odd white cloth being pulled down, exposing his body entirely. Then he understood. That didn't belong, not like he did. He looked back up at the snake with thankful eyes, and the snake just hissed in anticipation.

"Panther," the snake said. The word imprinted itself upon the rabbit's brain. He didn't nod, or show any indication that he even heard the snake. He just stared straight ahead, the word bouncing about in his empty head. Panther. It continued to bounce about unabated even as the snake pulled the rabbit down into the pile of coils waiting for him. Panther. The coils wrapped around him, covered him like a cocoon. Panther. They were strong, and firm, but they felt so good. Panther. They squeezed just right as they dragged him to the water's edge. Panther. The coils opened up and the rabbit's feet broke the surface of the unexpectedly thick water, yet the rabbit felt happier than ever. Panther. His body was sliding into the thick pool, which didn't run across him, like water—it clung. Panther. He would always be safe, and never had to worry again. Panther. He was up to his chest, the surface tension squeezing to his neck, just like the coils had. Panther. Even as his head disappeared beneath the surface, he felt safer. Panther. How couldn't he? Panther. He was where he belonged.

The bubbles stopped escaping the thick liquid after a moment, and the snake just waited in a pile at the edge. He wasn't sure what was taking so long, but he was getting impatient. A great long hiss echoed from his scaly lips, reverberating through the odd liquid within the pool. Ripples appeared, and something began to emerge. Cream colored ears did not break the surface, nor did a shapely little rabbit muzzle. A large, beautiful panther, inky black as the night itself, pushed itself out of the pool with purpose, toward the hiss that beckoned it. Its muscles moved like liquid metal, his body huge, hundreds of pounds patting along the ground, but with such grace that no sound broke through the now silent jungle. And his eyes, a beautiful yellow, just like the snake's--But different, somehow. The powerful glow that came from the snake's eyes was not mimicked in the panther's. The panther's, despite their deep, golden beauty, were dull, and dark. No spark of intelligence directed them, only instinct. The new panther sat on his massive haunches before the snake, staring back with a very familiar, dumb, smile.

"Massster," the snake said, and the panther walked towards the pile of coils that awaited him, this new word the only thing bouncing about in his empty head, ever again.