

Finally, I am here - and the advert wasn't lying about the place.

There are few signs of civilization here beyond a few houses and pebble roads, and the only artificial lights are the lampposts to guide the vehicles in and out of the town. It's just like the advert showed, which seems nice to me so far. I can get some much-needed peace and quiet, and I can be away from screens and buttons while on vacation. I am tired of having to deal with my job and its "perks", so a brief respite should do me some good.

On my way to the hostel, cars come and go along the road - a few brands of which I don't recognize and all of them tossing up clouds of dust towards me. Not going to let that ruin my vacation before it even starts, though. Just a bit further and I will wash of the dust and sweat sticking to me like epoxy.

Before long, I find a sign pointing east with the name "Cursed Rock". This was the place.

My excitement dulled at the reception desk however, as the woman asked me for a QR code to review my ID data. Begrudgingly, I pull out my smartphone and search for the QR code. I have an app to scan QR codes, so I show it to the receptionist. No answer from her, at first. But after a few seconds she says:

"No, I mean the QR code print."

"Print?"

"Yes, like the one in the pillar next to the counter."

She pointed to a piece of plastic with the squared pattern, and then looked at me with a cheery expression. Was I supposed to bring a print with that pattern before arriving at the hostel? Silly me - should have thought to use a printer! Well, the only thing left to do was to affirm I made a reservation.

"Excuse me, but I did not bring a QR code. I made a reservation and wrote the data on my notes. By any chance, do you have a reservation under the name Lucas Rivers?"

And I waited for many more long, painful seconds for the receptionist to find a result. Luckily, she found one.

"Yes, there is one result due today. You can also show your ID to complete the registration, please."

And so, I pulled my ID card from my pocket. The woman looks at the database, card in hand, and once finished she returns the card with a soft smile.

"Welcome to Cursed Rock, Lucas Rivers. We hope you enjoy your stay!"

I will as I take my eyes off the counter and turn off my phone for good.

Unfortunately, fate would have a grudge against me. It's natural that the hostel would be shared by other guests, but why are they gluing their faces to their smartphones? One of them had a camera next to her so that was understandable. However, another was swiping his finger left and right across his phone - probably looking for dates. Perhaps I was expecting too much when making a reservation alongside my workmates. They recommended this place for its ease of access and its commodities; I

Metamorphic - Written by A. Megastos (M5Transmissions)

should have guessed when they said “commodities”, they meant plentiful access to tech. Having gotten what I deserve, I headed to my room and unpacked what I needed to wind down for the day. It is getting late, and I want to get to get up early and start the day on the right foot. I put on my headphones, press the play button on my Walkman and drift away...

When the sun broke through the next morning, I got up and readied my clothes for the stroll outside. On my way out, the camera girl from yesterday was also on her way out the door - camera in hand, of course. It was nice to see someone with their face stuck on something other than their phone. Maybe I could go and talk to her and share our experiences at Cursed Rock with each other whenever we return to the hostel. For now, I head to the shore to have a quick dip and enjoy the hot breeze - to get my mind away from yesterday's awkward encounter at the hostel. The shore is not far from Cursed Rock, and I reach the place within minutes. There, some people are setting up parasols while others are leaving their tents, getting ready for the day. As for me, I set my beach towel down and use my bag as a pillow, ready to get some rest without a care in the world.

rr

At that moment, a distant sound buzzes through my ears. I try to not pay attention to it.

rr

After a few more seconds of this noise, I open my eyes to find the source of that annoying sound. Instead of bathing in the sun's rays, I find myself under the shadow of a flying object. A drone the size of a pizza box was flying above me.

I was really hoping not to find another gadget out in this place – much less one actively invading my personal space. It really seems like there is no escape from all this stupid technology no matter how hard I try. It just confuses me and frames me as incompetent in front of everyone. The one time I try to stop feeling frustrated about this... why did I even try in the first place? Escaping the wave of technology is pointless and like oil – I just can't mix with it. So now I must take my leave.

With my towel and bag in hand, I head back to Cursed Rock but I stop at the door. Even though that drone is flying through the skies, I know for certain what awaits me inside. Perhaps I can go back later when everyone is in their rooms and sleeping; the day is still bright enough to find somewhere I can feel at ease. Thus, I decide to walk away from the hostel, the shore, and even the road itself because I refuse to eat dust again! Eventually, I find myself in front of a forest so tall that I had to lift my head to see the treetops. Without hesitation, I enter the forest and go deeper and deeper until I can find a place where I won't even hear a phone's notification sound.

The noises get louder as I keep going into the forest, but now they are different from what I was hearing before: rhythmic buzzing, bird chirps and some dry howls. Only when the sounds had reached their peak, and the sky dyed the forest in pink and orange hues did I realize I went too deep into the forest. I was so desperate to get away from the noise of technology, I didn't pay attention to where I was going, and fear soon swelled in my gut. With no GPS to guide me back to the hostel, my only real option was to head to the shore where the sun was setting. The road seemed to stretch for miles, and I was struggling to see in front of me as it got darker with each step. Soon enough, the sun disappeared over the horizon. With the vibrant colors gone from the trees, the clouds and even the firmament, I lost

all sense of where I am. I cannot even hear the waves of the ocean among the cacophony of buzzes resembling a baby's cry and howls.

My regret from running off into the woods in a huff was palpable. The phone I left at home truly would have been helpful right now, be it to mark a route or even just to light the way with its bright screen. As of now though, I am surrounded by darkness, and I can only continue to follow my previous instinct of going where the sun was. The forest remains tall and imposing, and there was still no sign of the shore, either. This forced me to stop for a moment to survey the environment and get my bearings. There was no sand or salty air, especially as the wind gusts slowly taper off. The ground is barren, hardy, and cold, with nary a leaf under my feet. Some trees feel soft to the touch, while others feel cold like the ground despite their leaves and their branches. As I observe these strange trees, I raise my head and find no stars in the pitch-black firmament. My hopelessness sealed, I resign to making do and waiting out the night. Wrapping myself in my beach towel and my bag as a pillow, I lay down and try to force myself to sleep under the black sky and the buzzes. Before I knew it, I fell asleep under the constant sounds of the nighttime fauna...

When I wake up, I find that I'm still in the forest – and that the sun has not risen at all. The place was as dark as the moment I went to sleep, with nary a change in the sky's tones nor the temperature. Even the forest buzzing is still going. Clearly, I woke up too early... but my rumbling stomach says otherwise. My quivering legs and lightheadedness compound my hunger, and the strain I have put on my scrawny body only makes it worse. Yet there is nothing edible around to consume, and no signs of organized civilization around me. I can't even see or hear the shore from here, and the darkness was unrelenting. That's what I get for leaving home just for a few hours of isolation from technology – no one around and no way to reach them.

Despite everything working against me, I must keep the hope that I will be found eventually, and all will be fine once that happens. But the path I walk is drifting away from the forest I initially came upon, as the tree trunks widened further and further, fusing with the ground below. The sounds of the forest fell silent, and the warm winds that came in gave way to a chilling air so thick I could see it. Still, I know I'm not too far from Cursed Rock. As long as I get to an open place where people can see me, someone with a camera or flying drone will find me. Yet now I only can sense the cold air and the massive towers looming over me, reaching towards the sky. At this point I am not even sure if I can return to the forest, and the hunger and exhaustion were clouding my judgment.

As the path narrows down, my eyes became drawn to a faint, orange light that flickered in the darkness. Accompanying it was a strange, recurring sound that reached my ears.

That combination provided just enough of an energy surge for me to rush towards it. Regardless of the muddy, almost slippery ground I tread on, I know that I want – no, I must get there now. I don't care if everything's getting darker, colder, and more humid. I also don't care that I still don't know what those intense sounds are. All that matters is getting inside, and that's underlined by how I dive into the window carved out of the wall where the light's coming from. Once inside, my body summarily collapses from exhaustion...

Sometime later, I open my eyes and I find myself surrounded by stone walls, lit by what appear to be small bulbs. I hear the faint bubbling of water, and my body homes in on a polished cup containing

the liquid sitting right next to me. Having emptied it in seconds and feeling refreshed, I feel I can properly survey my environment by asking a simple question: where am I?

I don't get a lot of clarity as I inspect this unfamiliar location. What I first saw as light bulbs were actually the embers of hot wooden candles. Every surface – including the roof – is carved out of the same stone and dirt that make up the floor. The only thing clear to me was that I landed in a cave during my hunger- and exhaustion-addled journey. Looking outside the window, the dark, starless sky remains the same as I had first seen it – with no indication as to whether morning has come or passed.

Then I turn to the water container that is lying next to me, now flipped upside down. The embers from the sticks flicker brightly onto the cup, which is a comforting sight. It reminded me of some ASMR videos and cartoons that I've seen online, but actually seeing the light of the embers in person pleases me even more. In fact, as I observed each ember one by one, they all traced a line that went deeper into the cave, giving a clear view of where to go.

Compelled by my overwhelming curiosity, I follow the embers deeper into the cave with the cup in hand, oddly enjoying every step I took while shrouded in this light. Along the way, I observe the cave's carvings: they were scooped, but the streaks followed lines that carved deeper into the stone beyond the reach of the embers. Yet why was each scoop so much larger than my palms? It's another question I have about this strange place, but I still want to see what lies ahead. Soon, the embers ceased appearing, and the last one is now behind me, stretching its light as far as it can. Now, I can only feel the walls with my hands to figure out the path I have to follow, surveying the way for a few yards. A fizzing sound reaches me, breaking my immersion in the environment and causing me to proceed with caution. Still hugging the walls, I head to the source of the sound.

I find an illuminated room, and a silhouette putting a gleaming stick onto a container full of water, which then evaporates quickly. It filled the air with a hot mist that reached me and then followed the dark passage I came through. Still alert from the strange circumstances so far, I decide to keep my distance without uttering a single word. Soon the silhouette departs, carrying the formerly glowing object in its hand. I want to know about this person, this place, and the route I have to take to get back to the hostel. I follow as the lights in the room fade slowly, but the figure was no longer within sight. I cannot even hear the person's footsteps.

Now I'm at a complete loss as to what to do. I can only respond to the sounds and sensations around me – all while being totally confused by it all. All I know is that my feet are going forward, I feel the rock and its crevices, and the echoes running through the cave fill my ears.

Throwing caution to the wind, I call out for the person inside the cave:

"Hello? I got lost and I ended up in this place. I want to thank you for the water."

No reply. A light appears at the turn of the passage.

"Do you know about Cursed Rock?"

...

"Do you know how to return to the beach?"

STAY AWAY...

I did not understand the reply.

YOU ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE!

The voice becomes increasingly hostile. With my reasoning returning, I go back to the entrance with the torches slowly fading away from exhaustion – they are definitely not like LEDs. As the lights disappeared, my confusion only rose. Was that same person the one who passed me the water? Then what caused the hostile response? Why is this person living in such a strange place? So many thoughts swarm my head, but right now there's one thing left to do - find out the secrets of this person and the place he calls home.

Past the time the embers faded, I hear a hard noise - then another - and another. I venture into the caves guided by the echoes coming from the depths of the cave, as clear as if I was next to them. My ears could feel the intensity of the ringing noises - like silverware clanging against each other. Going ahead, I observe a bright flash each time the sounds occur from the room. As I step even closer, I can see something like incandescent confetti coming out of the room, fading as they leave in puffs of smoke. Despite the deafening noises, the rise in temperature and even the blinding flashes, the anticipation pushes me forward within a yard of the room. As I step inside, I find the person in the other side of the room, hammer in hand among lights and embers.

The person turns sharply towards me.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? THIS PLACE IS NOT SAFE!”

He ceases his activity and rises from his seat.

I cannot discern his shape through the smoke and the remaining embers, but a deep sound suddenly makes my heart race. They were footsteps the likes I have not heard before.

The smoke and embers dissipate as this being approaches and more of his features become clearer by the second. His immense height became more evident, easily surpassing mine. One step closer and the smoke gets cut by the creature's gargantuan upper frame - clad in a sparkling red material. I run my eyes across his body, trying to define the species only to then notice the defined musculature: his arms, legs, and even his chest and abdomen are packed with muscle, and his only piece of clothing - a simple loincloth - doesn't hide it at all. On that note, the red on his body is neither clothing, a cover nor even fur - it consists of both scales and sharp crimson spikes appearing even on his softest areas. My eyes drift down to his crotch after exploring the rest of his features, and yes - he is definitively a male creature. Another step, and now his eyes become visible, flaring with the same intensity as the embers. The rest of his face follows after a sharp snort clears the last traces of smoke from his body. It was more a maw than a face, with sharp dagger-like scales protruding from his ears, the tip of his snout and the end of his chin. All this time I spent describing his features is time I could've spent running for my life, but now he's standing in front me with a bright gaze of his eyes. Stirring the smoke in the room with each of his powerful snorts, he remains in front of me - motionless.

“ARE YOU LOST, KIDDO? BEGONE.”

The creature extends his hand to me, aimed at my face. But my body froze, stunned upon gazing the threat within an arm's length and I could only close my eyes in anticipation of the end. Nothing

happened, and after a while I open my eyes through my tears. Rubbing the tears off, I can see the creature swelling his chest in his slow breaths, and the arm he extended strokes my head gently.

“YOU MUST BE LOST, BOY,” the creature says in a modest volume.

He then crouches so his sight aligns with mine.

“Do you speak English?” I asked the man-creature.

His face softened slightly, then looked away, as if he was embarrassed.

His hand, rough like an outdoor^s tile, moves down to reach my shoulder and grip it softly. I could feel his calluses and even the sharp tips of his fingers, making me fearful I could upset him. Then, one of his finger pads pushes my back towards the creature as he turns away from me. He wanted me to follow, and I comply - despite my doubts.

As he begins to walk away, he carelessly offers me a full view of his non-clothed backside. It starts with an abundantly wide tail connected to a toned back, with sharper features than the front. Each of his well-defined lower back muscles tenses and stretches with every step. His red scales gleam with each step as well, making it hard for me to focus on just his tail or his back. Soon I find myself staring at his legs; while shorter than the height of his massive upper body, they're bulky enough to support his upper body. Their muscles were the least marked but the most tensed, weaving and trembling with each time he stomps the ground. Then I look at his generous behind - a fitting connection between his powerful back and the legs that support it. Despite this creature's unknown species, he still resembles a humanoid in peak condition. Perhaps he's beyond even that, as I simply can't keep my eyes off of him. Something about the way he first appeared to me shrouded in smoke and embers sticks in my mind.

After a while, we reach a room that offered a living space with rugs and fabrics, lit by some embers contained within what look like glass containers. The creature points at the room while side-glancing at me, already on his way deeper into the cave. I nod in response and look for a comfortable position to rest for now. This creature's gentle gestures and the aid he offered back when I first entered the cave tell me that there's no reason to fear him. Finally, I don't have to worry about the environment killing me in my sleep. With that thought comforting me, I soon dose off...

I wake up in a dark room, alone. I have to remember this was not the hostel – gentle lighting, deep silence, no electronic devices, and no lights or sounds from said devices. It was not as bad as sleeping in the forest, but I was still in some place that's not Cursed Rock. That's when I remembered that I forgot my bag and towel! After stretching and standing up, I head to the entrance of the cave and pick up my belongings. Getting there was a sloppy journey due to the lack of lights, but I was starting to get familiar with the route. On my way back, and after entering the room with the water and the embers, I return to where the creature left me to rest. He was standing there, clutching a collar in his hand. He turns to face me and reveals a glowing blue stone hanging on his left ear.

“I am sorry! I wanted to pick up my things and-” I cut my words upon remembering he would not understand what I say.

He approaches me and offers me the collar with a nod. I take the collar, thinking he was trying to be a charitable host.

"You want to eat something, don't you?"

Suddenly, his words make sense to me now!

"Wait, what happened? How can I understand you now?"

The creature replies, "The stones. Hold on to this one while you are here."

The surprise translation was upset by the grumbles in my stomach. Flustered, I interrupted him by accident.

"I will take that as a yes. Please come with me."

The creature heads outside the room and I soon follow. We're going deeper into the cave. Along the way, I ask him:

"Where are we?"

"This would be my home."

"No, I mean what is-" I stop myself from finishing the argument.

"Your parents must have told you about it."

I was embarrassed by what he was implying there. Is it because of my physique? Or is it because I act timid?

"I am not a child, and I ended up in this place without knowing anything about it!"

"I see." He then resumed his way.

The air gets thicker as we approach our destination, traveling below the other rooms in the cave. Soon, my nose catches the not-entirely-pleasant aromas of the food he prepared for us – various grains and fruits, spoiled only by a few burn marks. The room was lit by sizzling stones piled in the center. Rugs were placed around the fire, and there were bowls for our food - his was noticeably bigger. He spared no time beginning his feast, sitting down and holding the cup with a single hand while scooping up food with the other. Soon, I sit on another rug and... look around the bowl. There is no silverware with which to eat the food. The only approach I can think of is to eat it like a dog would. **do...** I wanted to be polite and not disrespect my host by rejecting the meal he generously offered me, but I couldn't help but ask:

"Excuse me, mister. Is there anything I can use to help me eat this food, please?"

He halts his meal to answer me.

"It is okay. This food is not going to move. You can hold it with your hand."

"But my hands will get dirty, mister."

"Mister?"

"Y-yes." - I reply nervously.

"You can call me Walfer, kid. Please, enjoy the food!" - he encourages me while showing his fangs, as if he wants me to mimic his motions.

I decide to follow his suggestion and proceed to eat. Then I stop, wanting to properly introduce and explain myself.

"My name is Lucas, and thanks for letting me in."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"I am Lucas, that is my name." - I reply with a firm yet polite tone to Walfer.

He gazes at me, surprised. And both of us fall into a brief, awkward silence. Walfer then breaks the silence with a cheerful remark to me, perhaps amused at my shift in emotion.

"Nice to meet you then, Lucas! Welcome to my place."

"Thank you Walfer. And thanks for the food."

And thus, I resume my meal, not minding if my hands get dirty.

When we both return to the room I slept in not long ago, Walfer engages in a conversation with me. Not losing time, he sits on a rug in anticipation of how long the conversation may be.

"You tell me you come from above. What happened to your parents?"

"My parents are okay. They're doing fine at home in Penn- I mean, far from here."

"You must have walked for days to get there; makes sense you got in this place because you did not get a proper burial."

Burial!?

"T-that cannot be! I am fine and I just left Cursed Rock a day or two ago!"

Walfer pauses for a moment, puzzled. A few chin scratches, then a question.

"Are you sure that all is right with you?"

"I am okay! I'm not crazy, am I?"

"Allow me a brief inspection. Don't be scared."

I nod nervously, accepting his request. Walfer immediately places his thumb below my jaw. A few seconds later, he withdraws his hand. He has a confused reaction – like I am unwell-. His gestures only made me more nervous.

"You are not supposed to be here. You are still alive." That set the template for the rest of the conversation, with Walfer explaining this place and my heart jumping from its chest. Turns out that I had somehow stumbled into the underworld - a place where lives are meant to be created and made possible. This unimaginably large cave is a passage for the dead to then reach the afterlife. However, Walfer has no idea what has allowed me to reach this place. I try to explain the best I can about where I came from and how I ended up here. But with a long sigh, Walfer remains confused.

"I think I need to look for some answers. You stay here and don't leave." Walfer states with a concerned tone. After saying that, he leaves the room.

Pondering what has Walfer this worried has me scared. Our conversation has me thinking that I shouldn't be here. No one, even with any apps, will be able to find me. Of course, this happens when I wanted to get away from all of that and have some peace! All that hassle put me here because I couldn't handle something that's a part of everyday life. Curling up in the fetal position, I curse myself for how I didn't try hard enough or ask for help. It's not easy getting over these feelings of worthlessness, let me tell you.

After some time has passed, the embers in the room faded, leaving only the glass container. It had a faint blue hue, ebbing and glowing gently. Bewitched by how it looks, I get close to the container and wonder what it's made of. Is it electronic? Does it use batteries? If so, then what is it with the smoke and the embers? Do they come from solar-powered batteries? I guess they can get heated after being on for hours... but there's no sun in sight? Just like what always happens at my job, I decided it was better to stop trying to make sense of things I do not know. After a while, I hear intense footsteps - Walfer has returned. This time, I don't mind because what's the point? He'll probably say I am dead, or he is going to kill me off to end the matter entirely. As he approaches, his steps become deafeningly quiet despite his size. Then he stops completely without making a sound. Between my racing heart and rapid breathing, I know it will be over soon - so why am I growing agitated? I want this to end now. I'm committed to this. I want this to end it in a high note, I want to feel I followed through with this... I want it... I... I want to-!

"DON'T KILL ME, I BEG YOU!"

Silence.

"I would not kill you. You have a lot to live for, back on the surface."

I turn to Walfer, who then sits to ease my tension.

"All will be fine, Lucas. Trust me."

"Why am I here? I only wanted to have some time to myself."

"You need to know that a number of things happened at once to lead you here." Walfer then strokes my shoulder, trying to comfort me. I look at him, the blue lights of the glass container reflecting off his body. His muscles relax, a clear sign he does not want to harm me. I struggle to see it, but Walfer also squints his eyes, maybe to show that all is fine. I, on the other hand, look at him with a pained expression and tears rolling down my face.

"For now, you need something to wash your face and feel better. Come on - I will show you the spring."

"Thank you, Walfer."

"No problem, kid."

Before we left the room, Walfer pulled a stick strapped to his waist. Lifting it in front of the cave, he lights the stick with his fire breath. Thanks to that, the cave is now illuminated by a strong light save for Walfer's back.

"Take it."

I hesitantly take the stick. Then Walfer steps aside, to let me ahead of the road to this spring. As I go ahead of him, I see that he's wearing a cape that conceals his body save for his legs and the arm that held the stick. As we keep going, I can feel the air becoming heavy from all the humidity. Soon, we reach two caves parting at each side, and I stop to see where to head next. I turn to Walfer.

"Head to the right."

In the cave, the air swirls around me and feels colder and fresher. Then I felt the water droplets being carried by the air brush up against my skin. Then we arrive at the spring, open in a clear space that the flames in the stick covered in a second longer than it did the cave roads.

"Go ahead," Walfer said to me. "I will wait until you are done bathing - just be brief."

I leave the stick at the edge of the spring's pool of water, then stand next to the spring.

"Don't pollute the spring like that, kid!"

"Sorry! How should I bathe?"

"Take off your clothes."

"But... I would be naked."

"It is okay. There's nothing to be ashamed about."

Even given how bizarre this place and situation are already, this was just too awkward for me to comply. I grew up in a place that swings back and forth between puritanism and lust. Even disregarding that, my tall, scrawny, and mostly hairless body was not something I was proud of (especially standing next to Walfer). It didn't cross my mind until I was in this cave - until Walfer called me a kid.

"Please turn away! I do not want you to see me."

Walfer then turns around and lays down on a slope, eyes away from me. After placing my clothes next to the stick, I take a dive into the pool. I don't last long however, as the cold water quickly drained the heat from my body. I scrub my most odorous areas, and then abandon the pool while shivering intensely. I can't utter a single word as my jaw was rattling uncontrollably. The air around the spring was already cold, and now I'm struggling just to stand up and move. Soon, Walfer arrives having noticed my distress, and takes off his cape and places it on me hoping to share some of his body heat with me.

"I am sorry." I finally say to the creature the moment I regain control of my jaw.

"Don't be. You are very young and still developing."

I remove the cape from my body and give it back (not out of ingratitude). However, I realize a second too late that I unwittingly revealed my body to Walfer. My eyes turn immediately to his face to

check his expression: despite his sharp scales and the unfamiliar visage, his expression was one of calm surprise.

“Oh.”

Despite his subdued reaction, I try to cover my intimate parts. To ease the embarrassment, Walfer hands the coat back to me so I can cover myself. That’s when I realize this coat is the only piece of clothing he was wearing! I turn away in embarrassment upon seeing the creature’s genitals on full display.

After heating up for a while and dressing back up, we head back to the level above the cave. Back at the room, Walfer leaves me at the entrance without saying a thing. The room looks just as we left it, with the glass container glowing as bright as the last time I saw it. Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind that I didn’t consider in my depression: how am I going to get back to Cursed Rock? With that question dogging me, I look outside the room for Walfer but he is nowhere to be seen. I could not even hear to his footsteps or see a light shining in any of the paths he could’ve went down. Is he lying to me? I would hope not, after all his kind gestures. On the other hand, the explanation he gave me wasn’t very reassuring.

I wait for a moment, in hopes that a light will appear somewhere, or some sounds will reveal where he could be. Nothing yet.

A half-hour later, there is still no sign of Walfer. The silence running through this place and filing my ears is absolutely deafening. Under the current lighting, I couldn’t see anything besides the lamp. There was also no one to talk to, nothing to interact with, nothing stimulating... it was all starting to drive me up a wall! The only thing I could think to do to alleviate this cabin fever was to lay down on the rugs and take a rest. I don’t know if it worked too well or not enough, because after I got up everything seemed the same: the rugs hadn’t moved, and the glass container’s emitting the same level of brightness. It’s as if time stood still, and I’ll go crazy if I can’t find something to do.

I leave the room and explore the cave in the dark - better than staying in the room where nothing was happening, I guess. The cave feels harder to traverse now, both from heavy, damp air and the fact that I haven’t fully warmed up yet. I stop for a moment, unsure whether I wanted to proceed. Even with the oppressive conditions I resume my search, eventually finding a faint light coming from a new room.

This light was different, in that it had a weak reach and didn’t change over time. Peeking inside, I see Walfer’s silhouette at the end of the room, sitting peacefully with his hands grabbing something. Out of respect for his time (and not out of fear), I keep my distance. His hands manipulated an object, slowly running his fingers across it and the object conforms to their motions. From time to time, he dips his hands in water, presses them against a stone and continues his work. Slowly but decidedly, the object in his hands takes shape as the details are formed under Walfer’s hands. After a while, he takes the object and observes it, looking for anything that escapes his eye and needs to be reshaped. Once satisfied, he takes it somewhere outside my vision and then returns to his seat – once again with a lump he kneads on a solid surface over and over. He still dips his hands in water every now and then while doing his work, kneading and shaping the lump, taking pieces and defining each of them until there are no lumps left to reshape. After seeing his work repeatedly and scrutinizing the sculpture he held up high, I can

recognize the shape Walfer is making: human sculptures, male and female. And like the first sculpture I observed, he takes all his sculptures to the same unknown place.

It was shocking to see this from the creature. He was engaged in a gentle craft instead of the fire spouting embers, the gases emerging from his seat or the power of his body in action. It wasn't comparable to working in tech, with all the applications and having to troubleshoot them. There was a shape yielded into his hands because of a technique that did not involve brute strength. Witnessing that made my stomach feel funny, but it was not an uneasy sensation at all. Despite that pleasant feeling, my heart started to race and my breathing turns more laborious.

When he returned to his seat, I notice his hands were empty. That tells me I must return to my room. I hurry back, almost stumbling when my hands stick out from the wall's marks. Hurriedly, I cover myself in sheets and pretend to be sound asleep despite my heart going wild.

The time I waited for him to arrive was shorter than expected, as a resonant stomp is heard in the room. A stroll, maybe checking if everything is okay. I try to hold my breath to not raise suspicion. But Walfer comes closer, with a slow pace that is quiet enough for anyone sleeping soundly, not someone who is alert. Within feet from me, he either stops or his steps became too quiet for my hearing.

"You were gazing at me while I was working at the workshop. I could hear you sprinting back to the room."

It can't be! In my panicked sprint, I forgot about the echoes of my footsteps!

Despite Walfer's accusation, I still hope to divert his inquisition. There is no answer after a while, so maybe I actually did it. Walfer resumes his stroll and heads outside the room. Even then, I remain still, both with the suspicion he could be around the entrance and the possibility my echoes would reveal my activities. I should be relieved I averted a risky situation, but I still have the sensation in my stomach from when I saw Walfer working on his sculptures. Worse yet, the feeling went from being a pleasant mass to being a sour vacuum, which I could best describe as "guilt". The feeling did not leave for hours, costing me precious sleep in the process. When it was finally time to resume the day, my energy was depleted.

It was time to eat, but this meal is different - bugs in a stone plate (with slight burn marks), and a side of leaves. Walfer hands me a plate, and he's also holding what seems to be a giant metallic straw. His motions were distant and hesitant, as if the plate had something he did not want to spill or drop. And when he lets go of the plate, he turns to me and says:

"Be careful. The plate is still hot. You can pick the grub with the skewer if you like." He then points to the skewer, placed next to the stone plate.

I follow his recommendation, using the skewer to pick up the bug first. Despite the unusual choice of food and the unusually large size of the bug, I make every attempt to show my gratitude to my gargantuan companion. The skewer goes through the bug like a tomato, and with some effort I bring it to my face. This is when I get hesitant, and I ultimately ignore the surging temptation to nervously survey Walfer's reaction. I bite the bug and chew a few times before gulping. My quick review of what I just consumed: it has almost no flavor, faint traces of dirt and a few spices I cannot name and above all

it has a gooey texture. It's not bad all things considered, and I go ahead and finish eating the meal. But the **previous** sensations in my stomach return- both the pleasant and the heavy ones - and no amount of bug chunks are enough to completely distract from them. Still, I concentrate on eating my food, until the bug is gone, head and all. The veggies are next, and then, in my rush to dispel these peculiar sensations from my body, I ask Walfer for more food.

Walfer stares at me, stunned.

The sensations in my stomach fade. Unfortunately, a much worse feeling takes their place - embarrassment the size of my entire stomach. It's enough to cause my face to go cold and lose all color.

In response, the crimson creature... laughs!

"Of course! Let me get some food from the kitchen!" The creature departs in a flash. I'm left speechless as I realize I acted without thinking. This only adds to the concoction of emotions that I have felt ever since I entered the forest - desperation, dread, hope, embarrassment, and other feelings I can't even name that latch onto me and push me to act irrationally.

Walfer returns with another plate, serving me with a smile more bugs and leaves to eat. I'm uncertain about what to do with this new plate. Pressured by the circumstances and Walfer's excitement, I consume the bug. Each bite stacks on the mixture of sensations: the material weight in my stomach, the positive feeling that still lingers in my gut and the shame from my multiple involuntary actions. The meal continues and it becomes harder to eat, flavor and/or texture notwithstanding. After what seems to be an eternity, I finish my meal. Feeling bloated and with my emotions swelling up to my throat, I lay down in defeat.

"Did you like the food, Lucas?" Walfer asks in a chipper tone. I was not in the mood to say much so I just gave him a straight "yes". I didn't have much energy from the bad sleep not long ago. In fact, I've had little energy to begin with ever since I arrived at the cave. Between that, a lack of sleep, and the warm meal, I offer little resistance to the offer of slumber. The last thing I see before giving in was Walfer gazing at me with a tender smile.

What a lovely creature...

When I wake up, I find that the room is still lit by the sticks and Walfer is not present. However, I notice there's something different as I look around. There were a couple of torches placed next to each other, both lit up. Fascinated by the sight, I approach to take one, but then decide against it. I figure it was a trap to reveal if I was spying the creature. That did not stop me from doing it anyway, and so I left my room to find him in his work again. However, something started to swell within my stomach. It was a feeling like when he asked me if I was watching him work, and I stop to think... I am not sure if I want to do this, not with the kindness he has shown me. The comfy room, the reassuring words, the food he's served, the journey to the springs... that's all before I remember the kindness in his words. He thought of me as a pitiful child, but after our trip to the spring he did not drop his kindness. I want to define this feeling I have as the result of my cowardice, from not being responsible and following through. But there is also another feeling I couldn't define yet. Reaching that conclusion, I headed back to the room to pick up a stick.

With both shame and gratitude weighing on me, I decided to head to the room where I last found him. My appreciation for the creature's actions outweighed my shame. On my way to the room, I can see the mild light on the way to the room - surely Walfer is working there. The expectation of seeing him working on his sculptures fixes on my thoughts and nothing else matters to me at this point. And Upon arriving at the room's entrance, I see Walfer sitting in the usual place, kneading the lump with his hands. His eyes and his attention were fast placed in his job, and upon witnessing this, I keep the stick and its light away from his field of vision.

Walfer's work goes at a faster pace than last time, and his body moves with more vigor to stay in rhythm. The room's gentle light reflects off his scales as he works with the lump - stretching, pressing and even punching it. It's an intense display of skill and power, and the speed at which he did this demanded finesse and stamina to persist in his maneuvers without dropping the lump. I can hear the lump squelching, air gaps popping through every punch and loud thuds when the lump is thrown into the stone surface becoming a flat pancake. It was marvelous work - I want to see more of him and how he works.

I step closer, as he keeps working on the lump unaware of his surroundings. Now I can see the material he holds: a sort of white dirt that holds itself together until he tears it apart. Even with my exposed position and what I see in front of my very eyes, I wanted to know more. I step even closer, disregarding safety or moderation. I was allured by his dedication, his power and how the lump takes form between his hands. I want to be able to do something like that - shape things in my own hands and show the results to everyone. Another step forward, and now I hear his breathing and grunting every time he pulls and presses the lump. The light defined his scales like glitter - or the special effects of a photo filter, but there is no tech involved in this spectacle. Motivated by the huffing and puffing, I get even closer. Now I am within speaking distance, and I can see in even more detail: sweat dropping from his forehead, his back and his armpits as he works, following the marks of his hefty muscles highlighting the muscles' power and beauty. I feel that light sensation in my stomach once again as I keep seeing him, working on his lump with the power of his massive, muscular body; he is a lovely creature. And I get lost looking at him, inch by inch, enjoying his features and intensity. When I finally come to my senses, Walfer stands in front of me, panting and filling his chest with large amounts of air. He is wearing his apron while also hanging a fabric over his right shoulder. At this point, I do not care if he sees me for I enjoy what he does, how he does it and the means to do it. And Walfer looks at me with a content face, the lump resting back on a stone surface.

"I was told your kind found no interest in this sort of activity." Walfer ruminates for a brief moment, then resumes speaking. "I also got word^s you come from a land that had separated their lives from nature." He turns his head in the direction of the lump.

"I create sculptures. This is what I do to make new lives possible in the world above."

As absurd as it sounds, I do not struggle to accept this statement after our conversations about this magical land below Cursed Rock and more. So upon seeing Walfer and the sensations experienced outside my sight, I nod in acceptance.

A swelling sensation in my stomach tells me I need to settle some issues with Walfer, and I proceed to do so as I tamp down my admiration.

“Walfer, there is something you need to know. I was looking at you that time before going to bed and I did not tell you because I left the room without your permission. I am very sorry Walfer, I won’t do it again.”

“I accept your apology, Lucas. I admit I have not given you much to do during this situation, and I have yet to return you to Cursed Rock.”

He crouches down and taps on my shoulder.

“Let me finish this batch of sculptures so we can talk about the missing details. Want to stay around while I work on them?”

“Yes, I would love to!” I respond gleefully. But then Walfer’s expression becomes serious, almost threatening.

“There are a couple of important conditions you must follow in order to stay here. Do not touch the clay and do not interrupt me at any moment while I work on the sculptures. Do you understand?”

I nod nervously, understanding that I must respect such a critical matter. Once we’ve reached an understanding, I go to sit some distance away so I can watch him work and show off his muscles. Walfer returns to the stone board and splits the lump into pieces to make the sculptures. He runs his hands through each piece until he is satisfied with the resulting sculpture and then goes to work on the next one. As time goes on, I can see that Walfer does not drop his dedication one bit. Each sculpture looks as good as the last regardless of whether it looks like a man or a woman or has a different height, width or even hair type. This is a craft that probably took many years to hone to that degree, and a considerable amount of time is devoted to the labor. It has me wondering if there are any other activities for Walfer to do inside this cave. After a long while, all the lump pieces have been shaped to completion and Walfer takes them to a place inside the room that is outside my vision. Not wanting to mess up his work, I do not follow him. Once he’s done with that, Walfer and I head back together.

On the way to the room, I look at Walfer as he walks by. He was covered in patches of white dirt, notably around his hands and forearms. He looks pretty grimy, and his skin and scales do not gleam under that white patch. He seems unfazed by it, however.

Back at the room, we start to discuss the missing details about the current situation. Walfer goes straight to the point.

“I want to know what brought you here – to Cursed Rock. Please.”

“I said I arrived here to get away from my home for a while.” I restated to Walfer, disturbed by the redundant question. But Walfer does not seem satisfied with my answer.

“You must know something very important. Entering this place requires a few specific conditions happening at once. A spiritual location; a day of darkness; and an emotion of deep sadness on a single day. Those are the conditions required to enter this place, but this knowledge has long been forgotten in the world of the living.” I finally glanced at all the conditions that led to this outcome. The night I was wandering in the forest had a dark moon, and the name of this place - now that I think about it – should have been a clear warning of the dangers of this place.

“Something inside your heart caused you to end up there. And you will remain here as long as you keep it.”

I refused to answer, but my efforts to conceal the truth about the circumstances are sloppy. My face lost its color and my hands shake even if I clenched them.

“It was just an accident! Maybe I got here because I was feeling hungry or I couldn’t remember how to get back!”

“I understand.” Walfer says, raising an eyebrow. “We can head back to the entrance when the night is the darkest. If you’re well-fed and you calm down after this, I am sure you will return back to your place on the surface.” He comes closer and pats my shoulder. “We have to wait for when the night gets dark once more, and then we head back to the forest. You will be fine!”

Time passes silently, as the sun does not even peak in this strange place. From time to time, Walfer would come with a plate of food to share a meal and a brief exchange of words with me. He would then return to the room to make his sculptures, spending hours on his work as if he was in a bakery. I sometimes see him kneading and pushing his arms on this material called “clay”. That is not the only thing I learned from the man-creature; through our brief conversations, I learned about the tools he uses and the process he goes to make his sculptures. It was one of the few things I can do while I spend time in these dark, deserted caves. But I must follow Walfer’s orders if I want to get outside of the underworld, despite longing to leave the empty room where I stay most of the time.

After about a half-hour or so, I felt the need to change this listless routine so I asked Walfer about what other things we can do here. In response, he simply shrugs. “Why not let me join you on making sculptures?” I ask. His reaction was more blunt: “No, can’t do that.” Inquiring for his reason was of no use, he simply refuses to give an answer, and he ends up departing to the forge.

I ask, “Can I help you with the forge?” However, he does not even turn or pause on his path.

And once again I was alone in the room. This time, the bright object in the middle of the room faded as Walfer departed. I end up fading just like that object as there is nothing else to do for the moment.

Some time later, I find myself getting up after struggling to stay asleep. I see a figure lounging on the other side of the room, lost in a deep sleep. It was Walfer sleeping like a dog, belly up and heaving his massive chest like an inflatable mattress. He was not snoring, but with no other noise in the cave I can hear his breathing. It was a lovely sight - his face seemed exhausted yet content, his muscles were relaxed, and his body extended across the floor. He must have had a good day at work, and that makes me think of the times I saw my workmates passed out on the floor after a wild night of celebration during holiday. I am puzzled by how such a lonely creature can end the day with a smile on his face. I step closer to him, struggling to view his body for the light on the container was flickering faintly. I stepped next to him within my arm’s reach but I couldn’t see him well enough. I step closer. I crouch to get even closer, now sensing a faint heat coming from his body, a snort blowing from his nostrils. Before I knew it, my hand was placed in his belly, moving along Walfer’s breathing. It feels firm and flat, like a heavy-duty phone case. I feel a faint heat that grows in magnitude as I find with my hands new, softer areas in his belly. There are soft, warm crevices between his plates, and sharp, cold, scales which are

stacked tight, more tightly than stacked or jumbled cables. It is a wonder to find features like that in a body, something I would not imagine to find, even less likely to feel.

I spring back as Walfer turns around in his sleep, laying now on his side. Must be ticklish.

Sleep still eludes me. What's worse, the unnamed emotion reappears. My curiosity has severed me from my sense of caution, but there is something else that still overwrites my reason. Why would he harm me? He wants to take me back to Cursed Rock and he has told me everything will be okay. Nothing to fear; I can remain closer to this creature and thus I move around Walfer to meet his front. He sleeps soundly, exhaling deeply and chest swelling. I lay down to be surrounded, moving slowly not because of caution nor hesitation, it was... excitement. When I got there, I felt an embrace I never felt before. Warm but not suffocating, enclosed but not oppressive; my heart his beating frantically and the body soon responded to it. Heavy breathing I struggle to conceal, sweat in my hands and feet and a strain in my underwear. But I do not care, I crave his company and his powerful presence. And I stay there, curled next to the sleeping creature and under the presence of his burly frame. The excitement fades little by little and along it goes other feelings mixed during this moment: Anxiety, fear, hesitation, excitement... the one feeling that remains is that unnamed one, still latching onto me, alone. At this point I only was to cherish this moment, between the arms of this beautiful creature. Sleep was still now around which I appreciate for I can enjoy the moment before he wakes up and returns to his workshop. I wish I could remain like this one more minute, then another...

...

I wake up in the room, and Walfer is not next to me. The room is illuminated under a different light this time, glowing with a bright, violet glow instead of the gentle blue I saw the first time I entered this place. And I realize all what happened in the time I was not awake. Without a doubt, I would be in trouble. Walfer arrives with a couple plates of bugs and some berry-filled bowls held under his swollen bosom. He sits close to the container and gathers his half of the meal. He turns to me, and his face shows a faint yet visible smile. I move with an awkward pace, afraid of his judgement.

"Come here, Lucas. Do you want to share a moment together?"

"A-are you okay with that?" I reply, unsure about his beckoning.

He nodded and then picked a berry between his massive fingers, as if to say, "I am going to have my meal whether you come or not."

I go over to Walfer and eat beside him - not in front of him. Doing so brings that pleasant emotion from earlier back. It was hard to hide the strain in my underwear as it casts a shadow on my belly. Walfer does not even seem to notice me, eating his food happily and unaware of the erection I have. It's better not to bring it up. The meal goes on without much happening, besides noting that the food is even tastier than before. When the meal is done, Walfer pats me on the shoulder, looking with bright eyes.

"Did you enjoy the food?"

I nodded in agreement, which he reciprocates.

Given how enjoyable the meal was, that shared moment encouraged me to try and share another activity with Walfer. With my belly filled and both of us in a good mood, I ask the creature: "Do you... want to do something after you finish your work?"

Walfer drops his smile in a snap. Mouth agape, he takes a moment to respond to my question. "I will think about it. For now, stay here." He stands up, immobile. "And do not sneak in this time, please."

"Alright, I will stay here." Then he departed the room.

Waiting for Walfer feels longer than normal, imagining the thing we would do when he arrives. Sometimes, I clutch the blue stone in his collar to ease the anxiety. When Walfer arrives, he's wearing an apron and holding a hammer, probably leaving the forge as soon as he finished. "Take off your clothes, then meet me at the forge room." And he leaves the room practically as soon as he arrives. Puzzled, I take off my clothes except my underwear, just to maintain my modesty and avoid more awkward situations and I head to the room with the forge. There, Walfer wears a single cloth covering his private areas - but him facing away from me gives me a good look at his bare body. Upon arriving at the forge room, he turns and reveals he's holding a couple of sticks and a scoop.

"Let's go hunting." He says this with a serious look, eyes fixed on me.

I take the stick and I almost fall, pulled down by its immense weight. Not wanting to look bad in front of Walfer, I try to stand back up as fast as possible, propping myself up using this cold and heavy object he handed me.

"Where are we going now?" I ask Walfer while straightening my feet.

"Outside the cave, close to the forests."

"W-we are going to hunt animals?" I coil at the prospect of killing an animal, not wanting to get involved with a scenario that was either gruesome or dangerous – or both.

"There are hatchlings we can find and take back for eating. Maybe more."

I try to protest but to no avail. Refusing the offer to join him would mean a listless time in the room. I am sick of staying idly in this place so I couldn't say anything that would make my host reconsider his proposition.

"What should I do while hunting?"

"Stay in front of me while we are moving and keep both hands on the spear." Walfer instructs me.

"Sounds good to me."

"One more thing: do not leave my side under any circumstances. Do you understand?"

I nodded without dispute or question. As fearful as I am about this activity, I want in on it.

"Good! Then let's go together Lucas."

We leave the cave, walking carefully on the flat, smooth path to the cave, each step pressed onto the ground. The cold environment makes me want to go swim in the springs, but I can only follow

Walfer's guidance to reach the hunting grounds. Each time he instructs me to go somewhere he presses the cold metallic stick on my shoulder and then points in a certain direction. The field is more visible with the torch in Walfer's hand, and it revealed a dreadful landscape: barren lands and tree-like formations made from the same ground as if the land made this to reflect the lands above. With the torch's light, I could notice they had the same elements of a tree -branches, leaves and even fruits- made with of the smooth rock on the ground. It didn't take long to notice the land was not devoid of life, as a couple of red eyes appeared in the vicinity.

"Stay close to me." Walfer then leans closer to me and extending the torch forward towards the eyes. Over time, the eyes disappear.

"What was that thing?" I asked.

"We'll discuss that later."

Moving forward, we find a few holes in the ground near the tree-like formations. We stop there and Walfer hands me the torch so I can check the holes. After a while, he holds my shoulder and then he points to another empty space. We proceed further and we repeat these actions a couple more times until he finds the food. Upon this, he takes the torch back and instructs me on how to hunt for food. What I got from that was I would have to scrape the "trunk" little by little and not pierce it - or else the food would get ruined. Meanwhile, Walfer would stay on the lookout for any threats roaming around. With my hands firmly grasping this metal stick, I start scraping the rock-like trunk - poking at it at the sides to avoid hitting the center of this material. Each impact sent tremors through the stick and my hands, debilitating my arms with each swing. I had to take the occasional break, but I kept on scraping the trunk, tearing chips of rock and blowing small puffs of dust. Then, after scraping a good portion of the trunk, I see something squirming inside of it.

Upon witnessing this sight, Walfer hands me the torch and instructs me to stand behind him and look for any hidden eyes gazing at us. Then, I hear rocks cracking as they're being thrown to the ground. Just for a moment, I turn to watch Walfer, who's tearing the trunk with his bare hands and pulling it until chunks of rock break from the trunk. When he finally stops, I hear a tiny squelch and then heaving.

The creature in Walfer's hands was one of the grubs he serves with our meals, now swinging as if it's trying to attach itself back to the trunk. He trades the grub for the torch I was holding and then turns his head away, as if to say I should go for the next trunk. We keep moving around the place and review trunks - even the ones without holes around them. Sometimes, we stop and scrape them to find more grubs, which I have to carry around and hold tightly to keep them from slipping away. Squishy, smooth, and a bit damp, I soon got used to how icky the grubs feel. Over time, we spot more eyes with increasing frequency - and larger amounts each time. They retreat as the torch points at them. However, it got to where Walfer gestures to make our way back to the cave, and I struggled to match his speed and move to where he points. At the slope before the cave, Walfer instructs me to go ahead, and not stop until I get inside. Walfer follows, swinging the torch around and checking if the eyes chased us. At the entrance of the cave, he sighs in relief and then manages to squeeze into the cave. Now that we are both inside, we scout the slope for those haunting eyes.

"What are those things looking at us?"

"Spirits." Walfer replies, eyes fixed on the slope. Another thing to add to this otherworldly place's list of oddities.

"Why are they following us?" I continued.

"They are following you. They are not fond of living creatures, even less so those in their domain."

I gulped in response. The time I got lost before meeting Walfer meant I was probably being followed by the spirits, so finding this cave was very fortunate.

"Are they harmful?"

"Yes. Very harmful to humans."

"But why did we go to hunt grubs then?"

"They will keep their eyes on you, no matter what I do." Walfer states in a somber tone.

That was a scary revelation, and it gave more context to this situation. All the care Walfer has given me so far - despite his aloof personality and the risk stemming from my being here - have been acts of kindness towards a total stranger. My actions throughout this time have not reciprocated his kindness, even if I acted out of ignorance or worse, when I acted under my feelings. Despite the lack of repercussions, I felt extreme guilt for acting the way I did, and I want to do something in return for his kindness. I step closer to him and tap on his waist, trying to get his attention.

"Walfer, there are some things that I have to tell you - about how I reached this place."

"You do?"

"Yes. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to think about that moment." I take a deep breath and then continue. "When I entered the forest, I wanted to be alone because I felt worthless. I am not good at using the various pieces of technology my friends and family use every day. Then when it got dark, I felt helpless because I didn't have those tools to guide me back to my place. I thought I should have died at that moment."

"I figured that was it." Walfer responds, turning his head back to the slope. "Only the dead can enter this place, and you feeling like a dead person helped you get here." After a moment scrutinizing for any signs of the spirits, he pulls me gently. "Let's get back to the room, okay? We can talk more about this when we get here."

We arrive at the room, and we sit down to talk, looking right at each other. The light in the container was bright and remained constant, its color purple like the finest wine.

"What exactly are these 'tools' you speak of? I am not aware of them Lucas, but I want to understand why they cause you sadness."

"They are... you use them mainly to interact with people and the world at large. In today's society, you cannot do much without using those tools and knowing how they work - otherwise, you'll fall behind." I respond in a gloomy tone. Despite the shame I feel, I want to cooperate with Walfer and help him on his endeavor. "I am not good with these tools and it often makes me feel incompetent."

Silence followed, as Walfer took a moment to think with his hands clasped together. He stayed like that for a few minutes - one moment he frowned, another he snorted sharply. When he finished his internal thoughts, he exhaled and then locked eyes with mine.

"I want to try something to make you feel better. Want to hear about it?"

"Yeah, would be nice."

"We can make something with clay and do so using our hands," Walfer suggests with a hint of hesitation. "I will teach you how to make something before you return to Cursed Rock. What do you think?"

I do not know what to think about this, fearful I would fail. I mutter to myself, "I am not sure I can do it."

"I couldn't hear what you said, Lucas." He then approached me closer, chest looming over me. "I can share details about my work and then you can decide if you want to try it. Do not worry about it."

Looking up, I see him sporting a warm smile. The light gleamed from his scales and horns, making him look even prettier. He is indeed a ferocious creature, but his kindness shows through his expression and his squinted, joyful eyes. Wanting to respond to his effort to make me feel better, I try to hug Walfer. Even if my hands could not reach his back, I want to express how much I appreciate what he has done to take care of me. He jerks a little in surprise, but I follow this up with a gentle hug. I could feel the muscles in his arms pressing against me, and yet his embrace was careful and proper for a creature of his immense strength. In the middle of our embrace, the unnamed feeling I felt earlier sparked once more - and it grew until it reached the rest of my chest.

"I... will do my best to learn from you." I say, wanting to take Walfer's offer despite my doubts. "We can start anytime you want, Walfer!" And then, a roar rumbled in the room. It came from Walfer's stomach, clearly signaling it was time to eat. We both laughed at how mighty Walfer's stomach was, not to mention the awkward timing.

The day resumed as normal, but this time the wait for dinner was more tolerable. For this meal, we ate the grubs we caught together, and they taste better than before. It wasn't because of the flavor - these are gooier and chewier than the previous batch and thus they were easier to consume. For his part, Walfer ate without saying much and wore a grin on his face the entire time. Before leaving, I ask if he can stay a bit longer just to talk - to which he only nodded his head in response, then heads outside the room. Before he leaves to resume his work, I shout "It is okay, then. Good luck on your work!" As soon as Walfer left the room the light in the container dimmed, the hues on the light turning into a pink color. With nothing else to do, I lay down and wait for him to come back once he finishes working on his sculptures.

I probably fell asleep from exhaustion after he left, because I didn't hear him coming until he was close. He lays down next to me, trying to not move wildly or make loud noises. When he laid down on the ground, he was within a palm's distance of me, and I felt the heat radiating from his body. I notice his hand stroking my shoulder gently, and it feels wonderful even with his rough skin. After that, he retrieves his hand and stays next to me as sleep slowly claims him. On my end, instead of the usual

heightened heartbeat... I feel relaxed, safe, and comfy knowing he is around. Soon after him, I fall asleep once more...

We both wake up within minutes of each other, and Walfer doesn't waste any time. Tugging me by the back with one hand and holding a torch in the other, he leads me towards the spring. However, we stop at the fork and instead head left. The cave then shows a way up that stretches little by little. It presents no difficulty for me, while Walfer struggles to fit as he goes ahead. The cave keeps rising and the road turns irregular with bumps and slopes scattered on each step we take. Soon enough, I notice a familiar mark throughout every inch of the cave. Scoops and claw marks extend across the cave - some look fresh and rough, while others look smoother. At least, that's what I can guess when glancing at the marks submerged in pools of clear water. They all became more prevalent as the cave got bumpier and narrower. Eventually, after what seems like an eternity, the cave opens to a much more expansive area that extends beyond the reach of the torch. I can see towers of stone as well as deeper pools of clear water that would reach up to my knees. I can also hear water dripping into those puddles from the obscured roof. Some of the drips echo from beyond my sight and others fall right in front of my eyes. I could even smell the same salt of the ocean, and some other earthly odors drifting in the air and reaching my nose. The sightseeing was brief, however, as Walfer instructs me to go between the puddles and deeper into the cave. Our path is surrounded by dripping water, some falling in the puddles and a few falling in our backs. Maybe there is one drop or two falling in the torch causing no effect on its bright flame beyond a brief flicker, as if coughing out the water that falls on the fire.

We stop on Walfer's instruction, close to one of the massive towers. He passes me his torch to free his hands and then enters a puddle next to the stone tower.

"Look carefully."

With his hands, he scoops the bottom of the puddle. His hands hold a grainy mass that glittered as it met the light of the torch.

"This is one of the materials I use to make the sculptures. Come and feel it!" Running my hand through this mass was rough to the touch, but it was light even with the added weight of the water. It poured out of the mass until it became bone-dry. When I poured the mass back to the puddle, some of the dust stuck to my hand.

Moving further forward, we stand at the walls of the cave and the smell of salt grew stronger. Once again, Walfer handed me his torch so he could pick up the material on the floor. I hear cracks in the ground as he digs his hands into the mass, cracking and popping until it tears off! He gives me a small chunk of the mass, and it does not feel like stone or the mass in the puddles with its damp sensation and light weight. Not familiar with any of this, I simply cup the mass in my hand without a second thought. Then, Walfer encourages me to... close my hand? He uses hand gestures to get this across - almost as if he expects me to crush the mass in my palm. I stand idle for a moment, unsure if I can do anything to the mass with my lean arms and my bony hands. My attempt to crush the mass was nothing like my expectations as the mass bent against my fingers and when I opened my hand, it showed fingerprints and even some of my skin's markings.

"What is this thing? You use this to make those fig- I mean, sculptures?"

Walfer nods in confirmation.

"We need to collect more for this cycle," he says. "Let's work on collecting clay and take it back to the workshop."

"You want me to carry all of this back to the cave?" I asked him, afraid of the workload.

"Correct. Experience is the best lesson!"

"B-but-" I protest quietly, trying to not upset my instructor. "I don't think I can carry enough clay - much less all the way back to the workshop!"

"We will see what happens when we get there. Now, let's pick up the clay." Walfer then picks up the torch and holds the lumps of clay against his bosom. I immediately follow him so I don't get left behind in the dark.

Before resuming the grind, Walfer marks a spot for us to leave the lumps of clay before returning to the workshop. He then snaps the torch in two, but the flame sticks to only one of them. Upon seeing this, he tears off a part of his loincloth and wraps it around the second, unlit torch. Suddenly, fire bursts forward from his maw, igniting the second torch which then faded into a modest size. Before he plants the newly-lit torch into the ground, he points to where he placed the clay to show that I should leave my load in the same place. Once I do that, we go to find more materials. Our journey through the caves stops mostly at the foot of walls and towers where the clay stacks conspicuously. Had it not been for Walfer, I would not have been able to spot which places have clay and which are devoid of the valued material. Like before, he would tear the lumps from the ground with his bare hands - piece by piece - until the ground popping takes on a craggier tone. I have to carry the lumps throughout the puddles and small hills scattered in the place, which becomes more and more difficult as we collect more lumps. Soon enough, I asked the beastman to return to the marked site. He immediately refuses, wanting to find one more place with clay and unfortunately, I have to carry the load and then carry more weight than I can stand. That last part of the exploration was more of a chore than normal, leaving me exhausted when after we arrive at the spot, dropping to the ground when I finish unloading the clay.

"We need one more bundle of clay. Rest for a moment while I go get it."

With that, Walfer walks away with the second torch in hand. I rested next to the bundles of clay, which ends up being a firm yet comforting surface to lay on while I wait for Walfer. The wait was not so bad as the sound of water dripping echoes in my ears at a rhythmic pace and my eyes rest on the sight of the torch reflected on the puddles of water. After a short while, I recall the black screens of my smartphone when a street lamp shows up from above my head, all the time that has gone ever since I saw my phone, or anyone's for the matter. How long has it been since I left the motel at Cursed Rock? I hope it has not been too long since then, and that people do not assume I have drowned in the sea. Would they even know I am here, though?

Walfer knows how to enter this place and how to leave it, so he's surely traversed Cursed Rock extensively by this point. Has anyone recorded him before? Then again, I remember that Cursed Rock is a place where technology is pretty scarce. There's little chance someone recorded a video of him walking the shores... but I digress. The exhaustion was too much for me to keep thinking about it anyway, and that constant dripping is lulling me into sleep. The clay, as soft as it is, resists the weight of my lithe body but provides enough comfort to allow my legs to rest for the moment - which is a relief. I

then affix my eyes to the flames' reflection in the water, and soon my thoughts just fade away. It was a soothing time - even under the current circumstances.

When Walfer returns to the spot, he beckons me with an authoritative voice.

"Get up. We are going back."

I struggle to stand up with my body aching and turning stiff. Maybe I relaxed more than I wanted, but I answer Walfer's call and finally stand up in front of him, holding a pile of clay twice as big as the pile I used as a mattress. This time, he did not need to state what I ought to do. Even with these aches and limited movements, I pick up the lumps of clay in a single scoop. I immediately regretted doing that, however, because the sheer weight of it all pushes my body beyond its limit. Before I knew it, I was underneath the pile, pinned to the ground. I can only see the darkened roof, but my ears listen to the following events: a loud drop, footsteps stomping on the ground, fingers scratching the clay, and then another, louder drop from far away. I find a beastly face looming over me, wearing a concerned - almost panicked - expression. He runs his fingers carefully across my body to check for any injuries, while he calls out to me.

"LUCAS, CAN YOU HEAR ME? MOVE YOUR HEAD IF YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING."

His words made no sense. I cannot reply to him, for I was completely exhausted from the impact.

Soon, he takes me in his arms and lifts me above his chest, placing my body on his shoulders. With no regard for the work he's done up to this point, he carries me all the way back to his place. He didn't even bring any of the lit torches to guide him through the dark cave. Walfer's fire breath renders them unnecessary however, as it briefly reveals the landscape enough for him to make his way through at a constant pace. He takes care not to move too much and exacerbate my injuries. Finally, we reach the room where the light container glowed a red hue.

Now safely inside, he places me close to the light container and crouches to check for any injuries under its helpful glow.

"ARE YOU OKAY, LUCAS? PLEASE MOVE YOUR HEAD IF YOU UNDERSTAND ME."

"I cannot understand a single word you are saying," I stated to my worried caretaker in a low - almost silent - voice.

When I see his face once again, I notice his pendant is glowing with its own light, and he turns away to notice that something is missing - my collar.

Despite the missing collar, he does not leave my side and keeps his eyes fixed on me to confirm my good health. Slowly, my lungs regain their strength and I can breathe normally again, which in turn calms Walfer down. He gently taps my shoulder to express his happiness upon seeing my condition improve and I grip his shoulder in reciprocation. Then, in contrast to his usual lack of clear communication he presses on my belly gently with his wide-open palm and states that I should remain on the ground. And before he leaves the room, he says something before heading out - probably to pick something to heal me.

At this point, I am used to waiting in the room and my sore muscles ensure that I cannot move from my position. Thus, I try to close my eyes and catch some rest before Walfer returns. At one moment, I hear steps coming from afar that become louder but then fade back into silence once more. Walfer probably went by to pick up the clay and leave it back at the workshop... and I start to feel guilty about what happened at the cave. He probably lost valuable time for his work, and I messed up gathering the materials. He is a kind, selfless creature, indeed. After Walfer returns and places the lost collar on my shoulders, I apologize to the creature for all the inconveniences I have caused so far.

"I am sorry I could not keep up with the work. I should have done better."

Walfer responds, "I thought you could hold that weight. I should have been more careful. I should let you heal before I take you to the lands above." He was clearly regretful of his decision.

"No, I am okay. I want to learn more about it." I protest against Walfer, not wanting to wait in the room for countless hours. "I just have to work harder!"

"Are you sure? You have to return to the surface safe and sound."

"What else can I do here? I..."

The realization struck me hard because this was a familiar experience. I have proved myself incompetent once again. At this point, it would be better to not try at all instead of adding to my pile of failures.

"... I cannot do anything right."

...

There was no answer beyond "There is something". Both of us were devoid of words for so many reasons. I come from a world that had no place for people who could not fit into their standards and Walfer has an arcane view of the world - incompatible with my needs. So Walfer leaves without saying much, taking the torch away from me for no reason. I can feel my heart beating faster but I cannot do anything in my current state. I suppose that, after all, I would end up in the room one way or another.

Walfer's absence would not last long, for he returns faster than usual and has a gigantic vase-like object with him. It's big and wide enough for me to fit inside and still have room to move. With an ear-piercing ring, the vase touches the floor - and I say "touch" because the beast lifted the vase with utmost caution. Even with my still sore body, it responds and I hop away like a scared cat. Against my better judgment, I shout at Walfer demanding a reason for this sudden action.

"What is wrong with you!?"

But he does not respond. Instead, he takes a metallic paddle strapped to his back and puts it into the vase. Anticipating another deafening ring, I take cover away from him... but the sound that reaches my ears is numb instead. I turn and I see Walfer stirring the vase in circles, as if he was mixing something but I am not sure what it is. Upon making eye contact with Walfer, he beckons me to watch with a simple nod as if my outburst didn't happen. Turns out Walfer is stirring a gray water, something gooey stirring at the bottom. From time to time, the paddle scratches and rings like a desk being

dragged along the floor but the rhythm remains constant and steady. Even after a while, the water does not change its texture or colors.

“Those are the lumps we collected.” Walfer says while still stirring the container.

“Did you make this thing too?”

“The cauldron? Yeah, I did.” He does not stop stirring. “Please look closely, Lucas. I am adding the water to mold it later.”

“You can mold it with your hands, easy-peasy.”

“Easy-peasy?” Walfer looks a bit surprised from the weird phrase but then returns dutifully to his work. Even with the ongoing conversation he does not remove focus from his work, and soon he would resume his teachings. “I need the clay to remain consistent at all times after I mold the sculptures. Think of it like wet sand!”

It was a simple and fresh enough image to evoke. If anything, it was a bit nostalgic. With a nod, I confirm that I understand his comparison. Eventually, Walfer stops stirring the cauldron and takes the paddle back to where he took it. After that, he picks up the cauldron - ready to move it back to the workshop.

“Want to join me on my way to the workshop?”

“Of course!”

Torch in hand, I get ready to follow my host. With the massive creature in the lead, we go to the workshop single file. Of course, I keep my distance so as to not press the torch against Walfer, and also because I was still struggling to move swiftly. On the flip side, there’s some sort of beauty to the sight of Walfer’s legs tensing up and straining with each step that I would not mind having myself. At the workshop, I knew I had to stay within distance of his objects, so I hang around his seat and let him place the cauldron in the inner room. There was no exchange of words to suggest I have to act like that; I probably was more receptive to his words due to the extraordinary event that led me here. With the cauldron now where it belongs, we return to the room with me out in front. Somehow, the room changed its lone light to a vermilion hue without any direct action from either of us. At this point, I am very tired, and I want to sleep after all the things I’ve learned, the physical work I did and the emotional turmoil I’ve endured - as brief as all of that was. The intensity of the light would impede a proper good night’s rest, but I have no idea how that container - and I do not want to find it out.

Fortunately for me, Walfer took the initiative before the moment got too awkward.

“You must be tired. Want to go to sleep?”

“Yes, I would be glad to. But what about the light?”

In response, Walfer approaches the light container and then places his hand on it. The light on the container dims little by little, without much apparent action from him, until it goes off entirely. For the first time, we are in complete darkness.

I spared no time to make myself some space to sleep so when the light went off, I am laying on the mat, drifting slowly into sleep. That’s until I feel a presence looming very close behind me,, soon

getting within an inch of my body. Turns out that Walfer has laid down next to me! I can feel the heat of his body and even his breathing over my head, enveloping me and stimulating my senses. However, there is no contact anywhere despite the close proximity between us and that small empty space makes me want to press against his body even if it is just for a moment. It is too much for me to take but as much as I want to give in, I do not want to make the same mistake I did in the past, so I ask him politely:

“Can you please hold me closer?”

“This is close enough.”

“Please, I would like to be hugged.” I beseech Walfer. “Can you hold me in your arms, just this once?” My heart beats faster in anticipation to his response.

“Alright, but don’t rub up against me.”

Staying true to his word, he rests his arm over me and wraps it around my chest, pressing his muscles against me and spreading his warmth little by little. My body was grateful and overwhelmed, my heart was racing, my mouth was dry... and I even got an erection pressing against my underwear. I want to continue feeling his embrace and relish in his massive musculature. With such irrational desires taking over me, I end up clinging to his arm to squeeze them, feeling his firm biceps. Along his arms, I can feel a variety of textures as my hands run along his fleshy landscape - from soft scales to roughened callouses to stone-hard spikes and plated scales.

Disregarding Walfer’s warnings, I curl closer to the creature’s arm and my stomach makes contact with his other muscles. But Walfer does not react to it. My body was already going into overdrive before getting even closer to him. Upon that approach, new reactions would follow, such as the heavy breathing, the sweating and... something else. My dick starts throbbing, and before long I feel something wet and cold in my underwear. Fortunately, my crotch is pointing away from Walfer, and that cold sensation brings me back to my senses before I end up breaking the boundaries set by my host. I try to move back into a more preferable position... but it was too late. Walfer starts to act funny, breathing more intensely and feeling warmer than before. Did he... like that? Considering how much I have tempted fate so far, I do not act any further. Now calmed down, I go back to sleep - with the added bonus of the creature’s gentle embrace and his soothing warmth, an experience that’s miles better than sleeping on the mat with nothing to ward off the cold.

After everything that happened last night, our daily routine changed drastically – this time, for the better. Even though it took some time, it became clear we got to do more and more things. At first, we worked on mixing the clay through balancing it, the water, and the minerals carefully until Walfer was satisfied with the results. We would then seal and store the stuff in their assigned places - Walfer handled the heavy cauldrons and I dealt with the mineral containers and empty clay jars. Then, we filtered the excess water from the clay to get it ready for work. Over the next few days, we prepared the workshop for the creation of the sculptures, removing the excess clay dust, stretching fabrics and wiping the board. This was all to make it manageable to work with the clay. With all of the gestures and motions Walfer makes for every single instruction he gives, I can tell he can actually do everything he instructs me to do, but he leaves me with some of the menial tasks. He does appreciate me doing them, though. Of course, there are certain tasks I was not allowed to perform due to their importance. Some

things I wasn't even allowed to see while Walfer was doing them. Still, there are other times where I would assist him by handing him tools or even a drink.

The night would end with Walfer hugging me to sleep, still holding me at a distance. At first, my body would go wild and react like it did the first time. Over time, however, it recedes to a point where I feel comfortable to be with him. I go from clinging to him to sharing a gentle embrace with him; from going out of control to feeling relaxed under his arms. To think that my initial compulsion would lead to this pleasant outcome is nice... but would it have worked with another person, especially a less civilized creature? I do not know what to think about my impulsive action; Walfer does not seem to mind too much. No harm, no foul, right? It must be a custom of creatures that dwell in the underworld, but it would be good to know all the things that would be disrespectful to Walfer. For now, though, I enjoy the firm support of his arm muscles.

Another part of our routine would be the shared meals. We enjoy the larvae grubs, berries, and mushrooms Walfer collects. Sometimes we eat by ourselves and sometimes we eat together. It's the only time when we engage in conversations, getting to know each other and about our respective worlds. Even though these conversations are brief, I feel increasingly comfortable exchanging words about a wide range of topics with my host. Outside of the meals, he does not reply to any questions or statements unrelated to the work at hand, like confirming what the tasks are or getting to know more about his work. Eventually I adapt to his more "no nonsense" lifestyle - not out of caution or fear but out of respect for the dutiful creature. From time to time, I would ask more daring questions that would cause him to fluster and stutter. Sometimes he answers them and sometimes it ends with some reassuring pats to show all is fine between us.

But one of our meals turns out to be different from the others. In one of our meals, Walfer bites a grub that is still overheated. It burns his mouth, yet he still chews on it and doesn't spit it out. To help him ease the pain, I handed him my pot of water. After he recovers, he stares at me - puzzled by my reaction.

"Why are you scared? I am fine, Lucas."

"I'm not scared. I am just worried about you. That must have hurt." With my hand still extended to him, I insist on the gesture. "Here, take my water."

He takes my water and drinks it little by little.

"Do you feel better now, Walfer?" I ask to make sure he is fine. When he finishes drinking the water, his face turns to me as if he's looking for something.

"I am better now, what about you? You should be in good health before we get back to your place."

"Yeah, I am." I look away in embarrassment. "Thanks to you."

My eyes turn away from Walfer, but I swear I could hear his nose puffing after that. The container shines a bit brighter, right after I notice that sound. It took a while for the container to return to its normal brightness, only starting to change after we resume our food. Upon finishing our meals, we resume the tasks in the workshop - without mentioning anything about the meal. Soon enough, my body is spent from the physical labor and eventually I find myself falling asleep...

When I awaken, I barely hear Walfer say something:

“Hey Lucas. Today we head to your place. Pack your things.”

I struggle to understand his words as I open my eyes, the room covered in darkness. I feel a gentle push on my belly, Walfer poking me repeatedly. I still cannot figure out what is happening or what Walfer is trying to say, but I sheepishly follow his orders and pack my things... which is hard to do when I cannot even see around the room. Soon enough, I trip, and my face meets the floor faster than I can process it. And when the lights come on, Walfer looks at me with a confused expression, uncertain of what happened to me. Now the room is soaked in a warm bright light - reminiscent of the one I would see on my phone - and my surroundings are as clear as day. It feels weirdly familiar... like when I was in my workspace pretending that I am working in tech service. Now fully awake, I pack my things as Walfer instructed me - all of them held between my armpits. Once finished, I approach my host - ready to follow him to the workshop and start the day. But instead of heading to the workshop, he goes in the opposite direction.

“Walfer, the workshop is the other way. Did we run out of minerals?”

He does not reply, then he heads out of the room as he picks a stick hanging on the wall.

“Where are we going? Hey, Walfer, what are we going to do today?”

Still, he does not reply, and before he departs, I follow him to figure out what he said before I woke up. On the way to our destination, I regain some of my senses. We’re going on a different path than usual; instead of heading up and left, we go right and down, and instead of a puddled path I feel a turbulent, cold environment. The air at the end of the journey gets cold to the point where I feel chills on my knees and my jaw, which is hard to miss as all my body heat disappears. We are now at the springs, which are as cold as the last time I was there. Why are we here again? Are we here to collect new materials for the job? Are we here to collect materials for a new job I have not participated in yet? Before I figure out what is happening, Walfer beckons me to come to the spring as he is dipping his toes in the water. Still with my belongings under my arms and the bitter cold not going away, I hesitantly comply and walk up to the edge of the spring. With Walfer now knee deep in the water, he offers a hand as if he wants me to join him.

“Come on, you have to wash yourself before we head out.” He remarks as he takes off his loincloth, submerging himself deeper into the water.

I say, “I don’t follow. Is this for a job we have to do?”

“No, today there is no job to do. We are heading to Cursed Rock soon,” Walfer replies.

We are... leaving? How did time go by so fast? I am taken aback by this statement, and even when I take everything I’ve been through into account, I still cannot process this realization. I’m left unable to move, unsure of what to do. I don’t know if it is good or bad that a cold streak ran through my body, but the uncomfortable sensation brought me back to my senses. This day had to come, but with no sun to tell the passage of time, it’s as if no time has passed since I first arrived at the cave. What is going to happen now?

Walfer, indifferent to my shock, sneaks an arm behind me to encourage me to go bathe. And yet again, I follow his instructions and act accordingly... until I remember my past experience in the springs. I only get as far as submerging my knees into the water and then scrubbing my body little by little.

"What is the matter?" Walfer asks.

"The water is still cold," I answered to his concern.

"We can share heat while you bathe."

"Are you okay with that?" Despite the tantalizing offer, I had many thoughts clouding my head.

"Sure, I know you will enjoy some time together." Walfer assures me politely.

I take off my clothes and then I start bathing, all under Walfer's embrace. But my focus is on the promised return to Cursed Rock and to my normal life after who knows how long. The warmth of his body makes the bitter cold easier to endure, but the strain on my body is traded for a distractingly constant focus on my possible return to civilization. I am not sure what to think about it - I am happy to be able to return to my normal life, but after all the time I've spent in this cave I cannot ignore the existence of the underworld or what I have experienced here. I am not sure if there are going to be any lasting effects on my body or psyche, but at this point I prefer not to think about it.

When we finish bathing, we head back to the room. With my things packed however, we stop at the forge instead. There, Walfer picks up an unlit torch and hands it to me. Then he picks up a metallic staff with a sharp edge on one end. Finally, we both get out of the hole and move towards the slopes that surround the cave - leaving this place never to return. As if this day wasn't strange enough, the landscape of the underworld changed for the worse. I can see eyes in front of my torch, flickering with a blood-red tint and viciously staring at me. Swinging the torch would reveal more eyes, all of them staring at me. Then more eyes would appear where I inspected before, all of them fixed on me without concern for the fire or the massive creature guarding me.

Walfer informed me there would be creatures looking after me, but I was not aware of their quantity, much less the feelings they harbored towards me. I cannot explain what happens when I look at them, but I cannot stare at them directly without my stomach stirring or my fear going out of control. In fact, this was beyond fear. It was as if their eyes could directly transmit the hostility and the curse they bear against me into my soul. I keep walking, trying to ignore the eyes that haunt me while Walfer stays behind me, vigilant as ever. And when we rise from the slopes, the view got worse with more eyes flickering over the background, even further than the reach of the torch's fire.

"Walfer, may I ask you for something? Can we go faster?"

Walfer grunts in agreement.

In the plains, the collective glare of the eyes would be blocked by the tree-like stones. Some of their imitation leaves wave back and forth to briefly conceal the glaring eyes. The shelter those trees provide is of little use, as the fear - as well as this feeling crawling along my back that adds to that fear - take hold of my body even when the stones block the bloody eyes. More trees appear as everything becomes pitch-black again - but the eyes are still lingering all around us as we keep going. Walfer realizes he has to take action against this threat, and suddenly I find myself surrounded by his big,

powerful arms. That's when I feel his body heat increasing to an overwhelming degree, almost as if I am inside a microwave. There is no light but the eyes surrounding us flared with a bright red glow, unsheltered from the radiance of the massive creature. It was enough to give me a headache that slowly got worse the longer the glow lasted. It soon got to the point where it was becoming too much for me to withstand and my body couldn't take it anymore.

Overwhelmed, I fall to the floor unable to withstand the tsunami of sensations that have been coursing through me. Soon, I begin to lose consciousness. The headache fades as Walfer ceases to emit that mysterious energy, and even though I can stand up and move I feel very weak. I have trouble getting around given my body's shaky and sluggish movements. But Walfer does not ignore my moment of weakness, and he soon embraces me and spreads his warmth throughout my body, intending to help me regain control of my body. The moment was brief, and things swiftly changed in a somewhat awkward manner. The protection Walfer offered worked, as the eyes disappeared from sight -so did the nausea and the stinging fear in my back, gone from my body entirely. Once I regain my composure, I feel Walfer's hand tapping my shoulder, but now his touch feels cold as if his energy abandoned him. I then hear him breathing heavily. He was clearly exhausted, but even so he pushed me to keep going.

"There is still a long way to go. We must move before the sun appears."

As we journeyed ahead, I noticed that things were changing little by little even with the limited reach of the torch's light. There was a steady change in the foliage, which traded the pale, rigid imitations of the stone trees with the fresh, glossy leaves of live vegetation. Then the branches change to a more flexible, gentle composition that moves along a subtle wind. That means that... yes! There is wind blowing on our faces. Along with that, a new element enters the environment: the sounds of cicadas and bugs, which almost resemble a baby's cry. We keep moving ahead, constantly reminding ourselves of the path we've taken to make sure we do not accidentally go back to the underworld. We never had to take radical detours, though - the fresh wind, the surrounding noise and the trees twisting in the wind are sights I've missed so much that they galvanize my pace. I want to reach the shore! My stroll turns into a sprint, encouraged by the ever-increasing noises, and then my senses catch another hint of the environment: salty air. I finally stop and my feet sink into the sand as I relish the familiar sensations. But the sensation I missed the most would be the sight of a starry night that - despite its pitch-black moon - was painted by the stars in the firmament. I am finally back at Cursed Rock, after what seemed like an eternity.

"We made it! Look, I can see the stars now!"

There was no reply. In fact, no one was around.

"Walfer? Are you there?"

I extend my torch towards the forest, but there is nothing that hints that the massive creature is there. There is not even a silhouette - even the bloody red eyes that stalked us weren't visible. I persist on finding him, wanting to bid him farewell at least as a sign of gratitude. However, before entering the forest, I change my mind and relinquish the chase. I shouldn't return after all the work and tender care he showed me - feeding me, working with me, and protecting me from the hostile creatures of the underworld. This is what he would want.

The only thing left for me now is to wait at the shore. With the soothing motion of the waves and the stars in the sky, I feel relieved to see this environment once more. There's not an artificial light or building in sight, either. Suddenly, there is a light bothering me and I look at my arm. Right next to it, I find the torch Walfer handed me to light my way forward. I do not want to discard it - with all the time I shared with Walfer and his current absence, this torch would serve as a good reminder of all his good deeds and his kindness. So as a final gesture of gratitude, I place the torch next to me and decide to rest until the morning. With the torch as a companion, I wait at the shore for the rising sun to brighten the sky and to see the day begin anew.

As the morning arrives, I stand witness to the skies dyed in green and blue hues. Little by little, the colors take over the dark of the night and the stars slowly fade away. Then the few clouds running across the sky come alight with pink-hued lines running through them, picking up on the soon-to-emerge sun. Right on cue, the sun breaks through with a blue color and then the other colors in the sky, and the few remaining stars are painted over with that dull blue. And now that the sun rises from the horizon behind me, the skies turn even brighter with a more vibrant blue.

The day has finally arrived. I can finally clearly see my surroundings and soak in the warmth of the sun. Everything is as it should be. Now there is one more thing I ought to do. With the torch in hand, I head to the ocean to cast it away. May it return to Walfer one way or another. Placing it on the wet surface, the flame is snuffed out and then drifts away along the motions of the waves. I have to pick it up again and then head further into the ocean, to let it drift away successfully. And the torch eventually goes inside the ocean, disappearing from my sight.

"Thank you for everything, Walfer. Please be safe back at your home."

As the sun reaches its maximum vigor, I can see people arriving at this beach. Some of them arrive on foot and a larger amount arrive via vehicle. This is a clear hint that I should return to the hostel and get things back in order after this incident. It is no problem at all to ask one of the visitors for directions back to the hostel, but before I head out, I have to report my absence. I also ask where to find the local police department, and once the information is provided I go there to report I am back. Their reaction is between surprise and relief – given their expressions and how they were talking, they must've spent a long time searching for me without any hints as to my whereabouts. After that, I ask for a telephone call to the hostel so it can return my belongings and then I can call my family to tell them everything is back to normal. Turns out the call to the hostel isn't necessary, since it reported my disappearance to the police, and they kept my articles just in case... or so they say.

I notice that some cash and my watch are missing from my belongings, but that doesn't matter because I must call my parents back as soon as possible. Fortunately, my friends taught me how to enable the fingerprint lock so there was no chance anyone would take it. After spending so much time apart from them, I choose to start a videocall so I can see their faces again. During the chat, they asked about my safety, whether I got injured or if anyone harmed me. I could not bring up Walfer or the underworld because it would be impossible for my parents to believe and I couldn't articulate it accurately anyway. So I covered up any queries that could've touched on that with white lies. You know – talking about the temperature, how the forest seems the same, losing track of time, etc. Then I asked my parents to help me get home - with all the time that had passed, I definitely missed my scheduled flight out of here. And with tears of joy and a relieved voice, Mom bids me farewell, and to return safely

after all the time I got lost. I truly missed my family, their familiar faces and their kindness. I couldn't hold back tears... I missed them so much!

After arriving at the airport and boarding the plane, I cannot wait to take off so I can leave behind the heat and my experiences here... yet there is a lingering feeling of nostalgia from all the time I spent with Walfer. Once again, I have to remind myself I am back where I belong - safe and sound with my friends and my family. I shouldn't take what I have right now for granted - the heat coming through the windows from outside, the bright clear sky, and the deep, visible horizons are simply not to be found in the underworld. The sun is like an everlasting torch, and it's telling me not to forget how good I have it. After takeoff and during the flight, I can't get my eyes away from the fields below me. They're full of details that, no matter how small they seem from my current altitude, are fun and fulfilling to observe. Even when we land, I'm happy to feel the cold air of my homeland once more. It envelops every place I go, and it's just nice to experience the fresh and dry air of an open, flowing space. These small and insignificant events feel important - they remind me that I am alive, no longer in the world of the dead and all my senses confirm it every second I keep living.

When I finally arrive back home, I receive a warm welcome from my family. My mom is especially ecstatic to see me, greeting me with a tight embrace. I didn't even have time to unload my things as we talked about my experience at Cursed Rock, why I chose to go there on vacation, and so on. We went on until nightfall, but I didn't mind it much this time given my investment in the conversation. When we finished talking, we take my things back to my bedroom and then everyone left me alone to finally rest from the exhausting journey to and from Cursed Rock. It's strange that even with the lights out I can make my way around the room without much problem. So, I get on my bed, turn off the lights, and I lay down until I fall asleep - ready to resume my life once again with a new outlook on life.

As the morning arrives, I of course get ready to return to my regular job. There is a lot to do from all the pending tasks I had to fulfill under my role. I did not mind the time I was in the underworld until now, for 28 days away from the outside world is something that cannot be ignored. Soon, I soak in all the training, the nesting and the updates required for my seat in the enterprise. This time, I do not turn desperate under the hectic pace of the workflow and the pressure it brings. I owe this to all the physical work I did alongside Walfer. I still have no idea how to handle my tech, but despite that I was getting better at doing my tasks just through repetition. Working harder seems to make my work less agonizing, if not more satisfying.

Other parts of my daily routine remain just as they always are, much to my exasperation. Traffic jams were the worst among those activities and no amount of laborious work can prepare me for those long waits inside my car. The radio was a small consolation, playing some decent songs on the stations I have settled on because of my lack of savviness. In an odd twist, occasionally I mistake cats and raccoons for the resentful spirits whenever a car or a lamp shines their light upon them. Even if they run away as soon as I spot them, my heart still jumps out of my chest with a primal fear. It has been a mix of emotions and changes that, over time, are blending into my life and steering it into an overall positive direction instead of a life steeped in futility.

One night, when sleep eludes me, I decide to hang out outside my house to get some fresh air. I can only see houses in front of me, so I look up to the sky. I can see a lot of clouds - remnants of the past few rainy days with no stars in sight among them, not that it's easy for me to spot them with the bright lampposts in the way anyway. Through those intense lights, I can define the textures of the clouds even

as they rise so much above me, almost as if they were the roof of a cave... like the one I used to be in back at Cursed Rock. I want to know if Walfer is doing okay back at his home, and should someone enter the underworld, may Walfer take good care of the lost traveler. Or perhaps, may he take some time at Cursed Rock enjoying the waves and the clear skies. His place is depressing, and he should live in a better place. I take a breath to acknowledge the fortune of living in a place like this. Suddenly, a stray cat running on a fence catches my attention. Thinking about it for a moment, perhaps a pet would get me over the fear of the resentful spirits even though they have no way of appearing here. With things for my mind to chew on, I slowly give in to sleep and I return home satisfied.

More days pass and I get more and more reaccustomed to my work environment. However, there are some new habits I take as a response to my experiences at Cursed Rock. To start, I added more succulent plants to my room. However, I end up not getting a pet after all. There is no way an animal would remain happy in an empty house while Lucas is working his shifts. The changes, insignificant as they are, often get everyone's attention.

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On a lazy morning, my bath time gets interrupted by a strange feeling on my body. It was on my back, a small patch outside of my vision but fortunately within reach of my arms. It was flat - almost polished - and pretty firm to the touch. With the aid of the bathroom mirror, I could see how it shined against the light running from my window. Even more strangely, I notice how it was of a blue-ish color. I couldn't think of anything that would cause me to manifest this substance - no habit or substance that would cause this to appear. Until I remember the one thing that resembles the strange parts growing on my body, something that I would not find anywhere on this surface...

Scales.