

Chapter 20

The start of the cave, or tunnel rather, is lit up by torches on either side of the walls. The sound of your footsteps echoes off the walls as you walk. You're both quiet from a general uneasiness, but also a fear that the trolls will hear you.

"Were you serious about the trolls?" you whisper as quietly as you can. Mira nods.

The further into the tunnel you walk, the darker it gets. The torches increase their distances from each other before they cease to appear all together. You open your palm and summon enough energy to start a small flame in your hand. It's enough to light up your immediate area, but your vision does not extend far.

After a while of walking, the tunnel widens into a larger cave, illuminated by a bonfire in the middle of it. Around the bonfire sits three large creatures, eating big slabs of meat. You can hear them chatting, but you can't hear what they're saying. You immediately stop walking, you can hear your heart pounding. A little further in front of you, you see someone hiding behind a boulder, peaking their head out to look at the trolls. Carefully, you move closer and you realise you recognise him. "Is that?" you ask, voice still low. You approach him, standing close enough for him to hear you if you whisper. "Dwite?"

He turns around and you see that same round face with those big round glasses you saw in the forest way back when your journey had just started.

"What are you doing here?!" he whispers a bit too loudly.

"We could ask you the same thing," Mira responds. She looks towards the trolls, making sure they didn't hear any of you.

"I was told the trolls took my tranquiliser. I'm here to get it back."

You remember him talking about that in the forest too. "I'm sorry, what is that?"

"It's a net infused with a tranquiliser. It will put whatever it surrounds to sleep. My own invention," he says proudly. "But the trolls have stolen it."

"Are you saying the trolls went all the way down to Lavish to steal your invention? Don't you think a troll strolling down the main road and into Lavish would've been bigger news?" Mira points out.

He pauses for a moment. "Jimminy said..." but he doesn't get to finish his sentence. He is suddenly lifted off the ground by two large fingers, and you watch as his legs kick and dangle under him. The troll moves him up to his nose and takes a deep sniff. "Food," says a guttural voice.

The ground shakes beneath you as the other two join the first one, and you now have no idea how none of you noticed the first one arriving. You and Mira back up, and you wonder if you could outrun them. They're heavy and looks like they're made of stone, so they'd probably be slow. That's most likely what you would have done, if it weren't for Dwite being in danger. You're about to gather

energy, but you don't have time to act before darkness envelops you. You feel that strange and nauseating feeling you felt when the guardian teleported you out of Smithereens. When the darkness recedes, you've moved ahead and the trolls are behind you. Mira is standing next to you, and you can see she's struggling with something.

"Mira! Stop recklessly using your powers!"

She looks at you, her eyebrows raised. "Recklessly? I'd argue this is the perfect time to use them, unless you wanna end up as troll food!"

"And what about Dwite? Are we just going to leave him to said fate?"

She lets out a frustrated grunt. "Why do you have to be so altruistic all the time?!" But you can see she concedes, as darkness start to envelop you both again.

"No," you stop her. "I will go back, you will stay here."

"You're kidding..." she says. The shadows have started creeping in on the sides of her eyes, but they've stopped there for now.

"I will not have you using your powers anymore."

"And what if more of them show up right here? Then I'm alone with them and I'll have no choice but to use them. And you'll be fighting three on your own." She looks at you, her eyes softening a bit.

"Look, I know you're worried about me, but I'm not letting you fight three trolls alone. This is not up for discussion." And before you know it, darkness envelops you both again, and you're back with the three trolls, just not as close as you were before.

"We don't know what trunkwinet is," you hear one of the trolls say. Dwite is still dangling in the air, but instead of being pinched between two fingers, he's now squished inside its fist.

"We can make this quick. Just get them to drop Dwite, then I'll teleport us far away from them," Mira says before she disappears into the shadows.

You gather up your energy, as you were trying to do before, and form a medium-large fireball floating above your hand. "HEY!" you shout, and all three troll heads turn towards you. "Watch your step," and you send fireball after fireball towards their feet, making them dance around them. But they're not dropping Dwite. You don't want to actually hurt them, so you keep aiming for their feet as you watch dark mist swarm like insects around their heads. They try to swat the shadow-insects away, while still trying to maintain balance as their feet avoid your fire. Still, they don't drop Dwite, and you watch as he is rapidly moved back and forth as they swat the air. You really do want to be pacifistic about this, but you might have to hurt them a little bit if you want them to drop him. You spot a rock nearby that one of the trolls used as a stool around the campfire. You try to aim your fireballs to force the one holding Dwite back towards it, and it's working.

The other two trolls notice what you're doing and are now moving towards you. With your attention split, you try to put up a firewall in front of them with one hand to prevent them from reaching you. The other hand is still shooting fireball at the first one's feet. You manage to get a short firewall up, and it halts them for a second. Then, the two approaching you seem to realise they're made of stone and walk straight through the firewall. But even stones have shadows, and you can hear them

scream as you see another shadow crossing both of theirs simultaneously. Mira's shadow, but she's nowhere near them. Their movements are halted as they double over in pain. The shock of it distracts you, but you hear Mira's voice right by your ear saying "keep shooting!" You turn around, but there's no one there. Trying to calm your nerves, you do your best to focus on the one holding Dwite again. You've lost some progress while you stopped shooting, as the troll moved further away from the rock. You concentrate, and with your raising heart it takes a while before you manage to form the fireballs again. When you do, you keep shooting. Apparently, the one holding Dwite hasn't realised it's made of stone yet and keep dancing backwards as it avoids your fire.

Finally, it trips and falls right onto its back, dropping Dwite. You see a dark cloud surrounding him, and soon after, it surrounds you too. You feel that same icky feeling from earlier as Mira moves you all away from them via the shadows. When your vision clears, all three of you are standing in a narrow tunnel again, no troll in sight.

"What the hell are you?!" Dwite yells. You don't know when he took his dagger out, but it is now pointed towards Mira. She looks a lot like she did back in Smithereens after the confrontation with the guardian, just a bit milder. She's now got dark veins creeping up her neck and back out of her black eyes.

She smirks as she regards his dagger, or at least you think she's regarding his dagger. You can't actually see where exactly she's looking. "Cute," she says, and suddenly, he drops his dagger. He watches in shock as his dagger clatters to the ground.

"How... what?" he looks terrified as he realises he dropped his dagger against his will.

"We're going to be civil about this. We just saved your ass, and you should be grateful. Well, you should be grateful to Pernille. I wanted to leave you for the trolls," she smiles, and it sends a chill down your spine.

You turn towards Dwite. "Did you really come here because of your... eh..."

"Tranquinet, yes." He says, not taking his eyes off Mira.

"I hate to tell you, but I remember Jimminy saying he hid it," you say as calmly as you can.

Dwite's head snaps towards you. "What?"

Mira laughs. "He hid your net thing, lied, and sent you to be eaten by trolls."

"I do believe he didn't intend on it getting this far. He did say he felt bad about hiding it," you try to reassure him.

Dwite curses under his breath. "He'll pay for this. When I get back, he won't know what hit him." He looks around, then back at you as if just realising something. "Which side of the cave are we in?"

You look to Mira, and she answers. "Not on the phoenix side. If you want to get back, you'll have to walk through the trolls again."

He curses again, and you ask, "Can't he just come with us to Levanter and go that way?"

“No, this is the only way to Levanter. You can’t get there via the entrance in Death Valley, which means I can’t get out of here that way either.” Dwite says.

“I can teleport you out. But you will owe me,” Mira says.

“No. You used me as a distraction and sent me straight into that creature’s field in the forest. You teleport me out, and we’re even.” He seems to have gotten over the shock of her appearance fairly quickly.

Mira laughs, an eerie sound, different to what it usually sounds like. “I teleport you out and you owe me. Or...” her shadow extends, completely draining all light from Dwite. “I send you right back to the trolls. I’m sure they’d be delighted to get their food back.” You absolutely hate this.

You can see Dwite’s tough exterior waning as he rapidly shakes his head, his legs quivering. “Okay, okay! I’ll owe you.”

“Excellent,” Mira smiles wickedly, and there’s a strange effect to her voice like another, darker voice is speaking on top of hers. Before you know it, shadows envelop them both and you’re suddenly alone. Only for a few seconds though, as Mira quickly reappears. She stands in front of you, quirking an eyebrow as if daring you to say something. But then she blinks, and her eyebrows furrow. She takes a step back, placing both hands on her head.

“Mira?” you say carefully.

For a while, she says nothing. Then finally, she looks up and her eyes have started clearing. She looks at you and says, “Am I... I mean, do I look...” She can’t seem to get the right words out, but you understand what she means, and you nod. She turns her head, looking away from you.

“We’re eh... very near Levanter. If you want, you can go ahead and enter. I want to stay back for a bit.” She says, and there’s a slight hesitation and uncertainty in her voice.

“It’s okay, I can wait with you,” you say, not sure if you should avoid contact, or put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“How bad is it?” she asks, and you can see she’s struggling with something. She doesn’t have any of that creepy attitude she had back in the entertainers’ camp or just now with Dwite. Which is strange, because the effects are way more visual than they were back in the camp.

“Pretty bad,” you say gently, taking in her eyes and the veins creeping out of them and up her neck.

“It can take a while.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Mira looks at you for a few seconds, then she nods. She sits down against the tunnel wall, and you sit down next to her, hoping you’re providing a reassuring presence as she silently battles whatever’s going on inside her mind.