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*Farthest Leaf*

The village didn't really have a name. It was too small, pretty much just a few houses and the children's home at the top of the hill. The village was built around the home: the few houses were children that grew too old but didn't want to move away. Yarien liked to believe it was because of her; she'd run the children's home for going on forty years now—or that's what she told people. She truly didn't remember. The children were singing in the back yard,

*"If Mr. Moris, Mr. Moris comes through your DOOR,"*

Farthest Leaf leapt from one fallen log to another in the woods behind the big-house. The other kids were boring. They wouldn't play Yorick and the Dragon with him, because Farthest Leaf always wanted to be Yorick—which was the right way of things, because all the other kids were stupid. Farthest Leaf jumped from a log and splashed into a shallow stream. He could still hear the other children singing,

*"If Mr. Moris, Mr. Moris comes through your FLOOR,"*

Yarien sat on the front porch of the small white-walled home on the hill awaiting the arrival of the Man from Office 2. She smoked the pipe that her husband had made for her years ago and rocked back-and-forth in her old wooden chair. The wind was nice on the top of the hill, and she could see far. She could see the woods surrounding the small town; she could see down the road leading from the city, and she could see the skyline of the city itself, its smoke, its lights, its crumbled towers and broken soul. She could even see the cannon to the west, a pile of metal like a mountain rising from the forests. She put the pipe in her mouth and inhaled deeply, letting out a thin cloud of smoke as the children sang,

*"If Mr. Moris, Mr. Moris lets out his ROAR,"*

Farthest Leaf knew he wasn't supposed to be in the forest because it was dangerous. Old Woman didn't want her to, and neither did Lady Lady. The young boy smiled when he thought of Lady Lady—Julli always made fun of Farthest, saying he had a crush on Lady, but Farthest knew that was stupid. He just liked her hair. Farthest brushed his knotty brown hair from his face as he stomped in the water, making splashes like falling bombs in the unending stream of undead. The bone guys were weird. Old Woman always said to never trust them, and to spit at them, but Julli said that was "racist". Farthest sung to himself,

*"What do you do if he comes for you?"*

There he was—the Man from Office 2—he was walking up the grassy hill to the house. The old woman didn't like the look of him, his striped suit was too clean, his hat sat on his head too straight, his eyes were always hidden by dark glasses. Yarien never liked the glasses, it made it hard to tell what the inspectors were thinking. All the State workers looked the same, and though she knew nothing would change that, Yarien had long hated them and nothing was changing that either. She stood from her chair, groaning as her old bones shook from the effort. She extended her hand to the Man from Office 2. "The children are in the back. I've told them about the test, they should be all ready." They walked around the good side of the house—the side with less horse shit on it. They heard the children as they walked:

*"Cover your hands if he comes for you!"*

*"Hide your feet if he comes for you!"*

Farthest Leaf looked down at the weird brass egg. It was big! Almost as big as the old woman, he thought. This must be the Dragon he had searched for! He, the brave hero Yorick, drew his twig-sword and grabbed his stick-spear and jumped at the beast, laughing. The thing made a dull hollow clang as he hit it, followed by a sharp hiss. Farthest stepped back from the egg as it began to twist and churn. It broke open with a loud pop, and a cloud of black fog spilled out, all over the grass and rocks and trees and Farthest Leaf. The young boy was enveloped in searing pain and he screamed and cried, but with each breathe the pain got worse. He tried to run, but the nails of his feet had sloughed off. He dropped his spear and sword as his hands burned, and his finger nails turned to grease. The boy fell to the ground and his screaming was replaced by horrid spasms. Soon his arms and legs could bend in unnatural ways, then his chest seemed to cave as his ribs turned to liquid, filling his body and bloating his abdomen. The pain didn't stop—that was the worst part. His spine turned to jelly, but his nerves were fine. His skull melted in his head, and his eyes fell from their sockets—but Farthest leaf felt every second of it. He heard the kids singing,

*“Find your mask if he comes for you!”*

Yarien and the Man from Office 5 sat on the back porch. “Alright, all of you above twelve gather here. The man has your test.” She looked around as the children stopped singing.

“Where’s Farthest?”