

This job would be a hell of a lot easier for someone with eyes, but sitting silent and alone in a dank cave was still preferable to death. Someone with eyes might be able to catch a glimpse of some luminous moss that blankets the slick walls—distracting themselves by tracing the path of a vine as it snakes along the rocky wall like a snake in the high grasses of a forgotten field. All he could do was sit and remember.

Memories were the only thing that got him through the first few years of this job. He'd sit and imagine the field he ran in as a child, feeling each blade of grass as it tickled his skin with each step. He could feel the fresh breeze as it cradled his cheeks, daring him to run faster and faster until his own speed left him in a giggling heap on the ground, his feet fallen from under him. He could feel the warmth of the sun on his face, and the beauty of the colors that painted the evening sky just outside of the village. He'd sit in that field and wait until he could hear the call of the crier's bell beckoning the children back home, and as the orange faded to violet he'd make his way back through the grass as slowly as he could.

*Plunk.*

On the way back he'd follow the same path, drawn so clearly in the grass that leaned towards him as the blades followed his movements before being shackled by their own roots, scanning the field to pick out other kids that had found their fun and now trudged their way back to the village with the day's last minutes of light at their backs.

*Plunk.*

The wind would ripple along the grasses, rushing alongside him as its chill carried him back towards the warmth of home. The grass and mud underfoot soon gave way to packed-down earth, and the path he walked became all the more predictable. Rigid. Silhouettes darkened doorways of light cast from welcoming hearths as parents stood awaiting the arrival of their progeny. He'd continue along his way, flanked by the sights and sounds of a village winding down, until he finally made it to his own. A doorway darkened only by the silhouette of the door itself.

*Plunk.*

Eventually that memory became overplayed. The winds didn't feel as real anymore. The warmth of the sun's rays felt cold. The laughs that he'd once taken for granted were entirely foreign to him now. The only part of his memory that still felt real was the pit in his stomach as he approached that final door.

*Plunk.*

It was at that point that he'd let the incessant sound of droplets falling to the stone floor around the cavern's twisting halls pull him back to reality. The *plunk* of each drop as it joined those that came before it in muddy puddles was a sound that he'd become so accustomed to that he could no longer tune it out. Each collision of water rang out in his head like a bell, resonating in his skull so loudly that it felt as if his brain had been stabbed. But that pain was preferable to what was behind that final door.

"...cramped down 'ere..."

A voice rang out from someplace far away. Solace. A break in the monotony of those accursed droplets. *This* was what he lived for.

"...not anotha'..."

They sounded mundane. There wasn't a shred of apprehension behind their

words. Not an enemy then.

“...swear on it, gotta get back topside...”

Once he had determined that the approaching voices were soldiers on their patrol, he didn’t care much for what they said. Most of it was to taunt him and the rest of his *colleagues* anyway. It’d take them about two-hundred and fifty *plunks* to make it to where he was stationed, which gave him two-hundred and fifty *plunks* to sleep.

“Ey there, Southeast!” a rough voice tore through his slumber “What’ve ya got for us today?”

It’d been about six-thousand *plunks* since he’d last heard that question. They were early today. “Nothing out of the ordinary. A few rats. South’s cough seems to have cleared up.”

“Yeah, your rats got to ‘im before we could. Gnawed to the bone in some places. Betcha you’re thankful you ain’t got eyes.”

South was dead. He knew it was coming since the interval between his sputtering coughs started to slow down, but there was a part of him that hoped it had just been his chest clearing. South was down here longer than he was, and though the two of them could never exchange so much as a word, he did feel a kinship with the man.

A sterner voice followed up “Since ‘e was your neighbor and all, you can ‘ave ‘is share of suppa” Two metal bowls were placed at his feet, each with a bouquet of lukewarm, day-old stew permeating the air.

“Thank you”

The rough-voiced soldier choked out a chuckle, “Thank the corpse.”

The two men then continued through the tunnels, dragging along what he could only assume was South’s remains. He reached out for one of the bowls and lifted it to his

lips, savoring the salty and soured broth as it slid down his throat. He took each hunk of tough meat and chewed it until it was nothing but paste before letting it join the broth in his shriveled stomach.

His appetite sated, he put aside the second bowl, leaving it untouched. The smell would keep him company.

*Plunk.*

Five-thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine *plunks* to go.