

The Traveler

The grizzled man, draped in furs, trudged his way up the mountain side. The morning air was crisp and he could see his breath as he slowly made his way to the crevice. The location was a dear secret and he checked behind himself often, double backed more than once, but no one had followed.

The deep shadows on the mountain side made the crevice was easy to miss, and it was just wide enough for him to squeeze through. In his youth the climb up to the secret opening, down into the depths, and then back up to the surface had been trivial but each time he returned it became more and more difficult.

He'd often considered taking an apprentice, or teaming up with a young wanderer but he'd never come across someone he felt he could trust enough. He'd travelled with groups before, even joined a tribe for a short time, but the secret place was all his, and he'd prospered for it.

Taking one last look around, the man squeezed between the rock walls and descended into the darkness. He had a small flaming torch with him but he hardly needed it. The way was familiar; the pathway opened up after the initial squeeze and always headed down into the depths. After some time had passed, navigating the twists and turns, he pushed through the last tight place and eased into the impossibly long and rigidly straight chamber he thought of as the throat.

He'd had no idea the total length of the throat but it was four meters wide and at least that again tall. The walls and floor were made of poured stone smooth as a frozen lake, or maybe even smoother. Every time he visited he marveled at the smoothness of the walls. He'd seen many old structures made of the same material, but it boggled his mind how something so massive and precise had been built so deep under the earth.

Heading down the long wide chamber, as almost a force of habit, he began counting his steps. It was exactly one hundred and thirty eight steps every time. Up and down game paths and through his regular travels the number of steps were always a little different, but this passageway was so uniform it was the same every time. His father was the same way, always counting this and that. When he'd gotten older he was surprised to learn how many people couldn't count. Most had a rough idea of quantities but that wasn't the same. He'd taught a few in his travels, mostly youths.

After passing several sealed up entries, he came to his destination. The archway was circular and reached nearly to the roof of the chamber. This entryway opened up into a large wide room with a ceiling at least eight meters tall. Inside was row after row of waist high tables and chairs all facing towards one wall of the room. Scattered around the tables were dull metal boxes that held the reason for his arduous and difficult journey.

Sitting down at a table he got to work on one of the boxes. The metal sides slid out if you knew the trick and once it was open he unscrewed a couple of pieces. Holding up his torch he evaluated the components on how impressive they'd be. He didn't want to take too many, and

from past experience it made sense to bring several of the same type. The pieces he decided on were the small cylinders that were clear with thin swirls of metal coiled inside. They were beautiful in their complexity. More importantly though, it was clearly beyond anything his people could fabricate themselves. He knew he'd have to be careful descending back to the surface, from past experience he knew these could break easily and then he'd have to come back for more.

Smiling to himself, he was confident that for another trading season the people of the various tribes he'd visit would be duly impressed.

Several weeks later the man found himself again climbing up a different mountain side. The morning air was a little warmer and soon it would be full summer. His furs were in his pack and he was enjoying the crisp coolness in the air. Up ahead, as he neared closer to his destination, he heard occasional cheering emanating from the village. This was always a good sign and Cytanis smiled feeling optimistic about his visit.

The pathway he was following soon opened up into a large clearing. Nearest to where the pathway met the clearing stood five or six long huts, bark sided, partially cut into the hillside, all arranged around a common area. Adjacent to the dwellings several racks of meat had been placed over a smoldering fire for drying, indicating a recently successful hunt.

Across the clearing almost all the members of the tribe were gathered in a semicircle around a tall wooden beam that had been erected for the event. Most of the villagers were dressed well, and looked healthy unlike some other villages in the area. The beam they had erected stood fully five meters tall, but small enough in diameter that a grown man could clasp his hands around it. Nearby, standing apart from the spectators, stood a man, stripped to the waist, with a thick leather bag at his feet. Cytanis recognized the imitation ceremony, and knew inside that bag were the two heaviest stones the tribespeople could find. From the way the man was standing, the ceremony had probably been going on for an hour at least and would only stop if the man managed to get the pair of stones to the top of the beam or he walked away in defeat.

All around the initiate the tribesmen were yelling and cheering, some encouraging the man to not give up and others pleased to see how difficult a time the man was having. The tribe was kept strong by the traditions and ceremonies, and every man in the tribe had earned their place by completing them. Seeing an outsider having difficulties confirmed the value in keeping the tribe strong.

Cytanis joined the group and was surprised to see the initiate was older, almost as old as himself. Normally these ceremonies were for the young men just coming of age. Those failing to

pass the ceremonies were expelled, forced to become wanderers. Often, those expelled would join other tribes as best they could. Life was very difficult for a lone person.

Presiding over the initiation was the chief. Cytanis judged it would be at least a few minutes before the initiate would make another attempt at scaling the beam.

"It's good to see you, friend," the chief said with a smile as Cytanis approached him.

"It's good to see you as well," Cytanis replied. "What are the chances of him making it?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the initiate.

"Not good, sadly. He came from the Wontam, a couple valleys over. Good leather worker, good scavenger."

"I'm surprised they'd kick him out then. The Wontam aren't doing so well these days."

"It's true, they've fallen on worse than hard times, but there was a disagreement over property and scavenge rights, and he came out the worse for it. We'd be lucky to have him but I don't think it's going to happen."

"Well, you're the chief after all. It's up to you."

"That's true, and even if he can't be a full member, we may get him to settle nearby. Trade food for services and the like. It would be better for everyone if he could pass the initiation but the rules are the rules."

"Sounds like following too rigidly with the past and not adapting for the future."

The chief waved his hand away dismissively. They'd had that conversation a number of times already with neither man budging on their opinions. There was merit in the old ways, no one doubted that, but to stagnate was to die and if the new man would make the tribe stronger then the rules were holding them back. The chief would argue that it was the rules themselves that kept the tribe strong and a deviation would undermine their way of life.

"Your pack looks quite full," said the Chief, changing the subject. "I hope you've brought some interesting things to trade. Things have been dull for a while, and we're rich in meat and leather. Those axe heads you brought several years ago are almost worn to nothing," he added as an afterthought.

"I've got a couple good things you'll want," the man said confidently. He'd recently found a new cache of some survival equipment and of course he had the goods he'd brought up from his secret place before he'd journeyed to the village. There was still plenty of bounty to scavenge in the countryside if you knew where to look, but the goods from the dark place were what endeared him so strongly with the tribes people up and down the hills, down into the plains and even to the deep woods.

Later that evening Cytanis borrowed a large blanket to spread out on the ground so he could begin unpacking his wares. The tribespeople gathered around, murmuring with excitement, eager to see what he had brought. He saved the items from the crevice till last, bringing them out with a bit of a showman's panache. He was not disappointed with their reaction.

Truthfully, Cytanis wasn't really in the need for much of anything outside of fresh provisions. He did hunt for himself some, but it was a time intensive task to dress and prepare food properly. Small game was fine but the smoked fish and meat were much preferred.

The other thing he looked for was local crafts, especially carvings, but some metal work as well. Each tribe seemed to have its own style, and he could probably survive solely on moving crafts up and down his normal haunts.

Three of the axe heads bought him enough food to last several months. He was able to trade some small carved figurines for some scrimshaw he'd been saving. For the special pieces, he traded two for a ceramic figurine, quite beautiful and remarkably preserved, but kept back the last one, not seeing anything else that interested him.

Several of the youth in particular were disappointed; to procure one of the special pieces would have earned them standing in the tribe. Cytanis had looked at what they'd had to trade just like everyone else, but it had all been junk. The initiate had been allowed to stay for the evening and a meal. He'd taken a look with the rest of them at his goods, but had said nothing to Cytanis.

The next morning he had an early meal with the chief early before he set off. He never liked to stay more than a day or two at most. Any more than that and he got the feeling he was an unwanted burden on the tribe. Some tribes had strict rules about visitors, and while this one wasn't strict, it was good manners all the same.

The chief had prepared a small list of items that he wanted Cytanis to find if at all possible. Most of it was the usual, knives, cooking pots, basic things. It was the basics that they were running out of though and some of these would be very difficult to find.

After his meal, he packed his bags, his wares, and headed back down the pathway that had brought him to the village. His next stop was a couple days journey to the west and he set off

at a reasonable pace. He was in no particular hurry, the day was bright, and he had plenty of provisions.

The day passed into afternoon and then dusk uneventfully and with little difficulties. The path he was on was well trodden so he had no opportunity to scavenge. He kept a sharp lookout all the same, some of his best finds were in shelters far out in the wilderness.

He choose a small rocky overhang to bed for the night. After setting a small fire to help keep him warm, he turned in early.

The blow to the side of his head jolted him awake, and before he had a chance to bring his hands up, another blow crashed against his forehead. Cytanis had the blurry view of some worn moccasins before his vision faded back to blackness.

The splash of cold water in his face brought him back around. Things were much brighter but his eyes were having trouble adjusting. The side of his face felt puffy and unresponsive.

“There he is,” a blurry figure said, cradling Cytanis head. “Come back to us.”

As his vision cleared he realized there were two of them. He recognized them as two of the younger men from the last tribe he has visited who had little to trade and had gone away empty handed the night before. They had him propped up against a tree, hands bound behind his back. The contents of his pack were carelessly strewn around the camp site.

Very sloppy, he chided himself, letting these two get the jump on him. It had been too long since he'd really been in any danger. He had gotten lazy, forgot what it was like to be hungry and wary. These two men knew what it was like to be hungry though, and they looked keen to remind Cytanis of what he'd forgotten.

“If you're after trinkets, you already have my pack. What else do you want?” Cytanis demanded, his speech slurred.

“These?” one of the men questioned, holding up his last remaining of the glass cylinder and then throwing it in the dirt. “These are trash. We want the good stuff, the real stuff. Not these things for kids and old women. You're going to lead us to where you find this stuff, then we're going to kill you, and if you cooperate, we'll make it painless. Be a pain in the ass, you'll still lead us to where you find this stuff, but then we're going to kill you slowly.”

Cytanis tested his bonds and found them so tight they were already cutting off circulation to his hands. At this point he'd be unable to even hold a weapon, let alone fight off these two.

“Fine,” he said with a sigh of resignation, “I’ll show you.”

“That was too easy,” the taller of the two said. This one was the leader. “You’re planning something, thinking we’ll trust you and you’ll get the upper hand somehow.” He nodded to the other man who brought down a heavy club against his bound arm. All three men heard the bone crunch, and knew the arm was broken.

The blow knocked the wind out of Cytanis and he fell to his side, writhing with pain in the dirt.

“You’ll still be able to walk, but no way now will you think about escaping. How far away is your cache?” the leader demanded.

“A couple days north of here,” he replied through gritted teeth, fighting back the darkness which was trying to overtake him. Everything the youth had said was true, he had planned on feigning cooperation and waiting for an opportunity but now, with his arm broken, maybe a quick death was the best he could hope for.

“Well, we better start walking then.”

Over the next few days the three men followed the same schedule, an early meal in the morning with Cytanis getting leftovers while the other two liberally indulged on his provisions, trekking until late in the day with one in the front and one in the back, then making camp before sundown.

The pace was grueling, especially with his broken arm. As the days went on, his bindings were loosened some but they still afforded him almost no movement. He did have some feeling in his broken arm but he feared the time was long past for him to have any hope of it healing properly. Even if he made it out alive somehow, which was highly doubtful, he’d have little use of his damaged arm afterwards. He kept hoping for a lone wanderer he’d helped in the past, or maybe even running into one of the friendly tribes in the area, but they saw no one on the three days it took to get to the crevice.

Late into the fourth day they reached their destination.

“Down there? Are you sure?” the leader asked after Cytanis had indicated they’d arrived.

“Very sure. The way is tight but it opens up pretty quickly,” he replied

“I think this is a trap. Get the club back out,” the tall one said to the other.

“No, I swear, I swear this is it. I swear, please don’t,” Cytanis replied rapidly, begging.

The smaller man advanced, club held to strike, but as he prepared for a swing the leader held his hand up, satisfied Cytanis wasn’t bluffing.

“So what exactly is down there then?” the man demanded.

“Some sort of underground place. I don’t really know, I’ve got that small torch, I can show you the way,” Cytanis blurted. Still eyeing the club the other man held menacingly.

“Fine, but you go first,” the tall man replied after a moment. “I’m behind, and he stays back in case this is a trap. If you come out alone he’ll kill you regardless of what you have to say.”

Cytanis nodded, having no real choice in the matter.

Down into the depths they trod, Cytanis leading the way slowly and cautiously. It was tough at some points with his arms bound but he knew the way well enough.

After they got to the throat his captor was awestruck.

“What is this place?” the tall man asked with wonder. No sense of malice in his voice, he was truly dumbstruck with what they’d entered.

“I don’t know, something from way, way back. It’s this way,” he replied starting down the hallway.

One, two, three, he started counting the steps in his head. Even in the tense situation he couldn’t help it.

“Fine, but remember what I said,” his captor replied with his tiresome tone of threatened violence.

Cytanis knew that the man had planned on just killing him down here but was probably having second thoughts about finding his way back up to the surface. There were many branching pathways down from the crevice and it would be easy to get lost.

His captor held the flaming torch high as they headed down the hallway.

Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, he counted in his head and it was then a thought occurred to him. It made his heart beat faster and now he was excited for the first time in days because he finally had a tiny sliver of hope.

Cytanis turned to look at the man and then quickly turned back; already afraid he’d given himself away.

“What?”

“Nothing, sorry.”

Up ahead they came to the opened chamber and Cytanis led the man inside.

“This is it, this is where I get those worthless trinkets for old women and children,” he indicated sarcastically.

His captor looked around with wonder, having never seen anything like it.

Almost absentmindedly the man put the brightly burning torch down on one of the tables so he could get a better look at the internal workings of one of the boxes Cytanis would pilfer components from.

“There are way better things in here than any of that trash you’ve brought up” said the man after a moment.

Cytanis suppressed an urge to lecture him about supply and demand and instead edged closer.

“Like what?” Cytanis asked, derisively, hoping to egg him on as he crept just a few steps closer.

“Like this thing,” the man pointed deeper into the box, provoked and wanting to prove a point.

Cytanis edged closer, ostensibly to take a closer look and then in one furious motion, Cytanis kicked at the torch as hard as he could, knocking it off the table. Shadows flashed wildly as the torch careened off the table and onto the floor.

Cytanis was already in motion before the torch had reached the floor. If only he could stomp the light out he’d plunge them both into total darkness and he’d have the advantage.

Not quite sure what Cytanis was trying to accomplish, the man lunged after the torch, knocking over the table in the process. Cytanis’ boot stomped at the flame as tall man crashed into him, sending them both sprawling on the ground. In the scramble the fire was extinguished plunging them both into absolute darkness.

Stars flashed in his vision from the pain of landing on his damaged arm but Cytanis managed to stay conscious while he tried to scramble away. Somehow the tall man lost his grip and started crashing about wildly.

The room was absolutely dark; neither of them had ever experienced anything like it.

Unlike the tall man, Cytanis had a good idea of the room’s layout. While the other man crashed around the room he began to slowly put distance between them and started easing towards the exit. After a few steps the other man suddenly stopped making any sounds at all. It had just occurred to him that Cytanis was his only way out.

Cytanis had no choice but to slowly creep towards the exit, being careful not to make any noise. Sporadically he'd hear a table or a chair being bumped into, closer sometimes, other times further away. Once, right near him, Cytanis almost cried out in surprise when a table very close to him made a screeching noise as the tall man bumped into it.

At this point Cytanis feared that the man would surely kill him on the spot if he found him, regardless of how it would affect their chances of getting back to the surface.

After what felt like an eternity, Cytanis finally found an outer wall and began heading towards the hallway when suddenly he bumped into a chair. The creak was slight, so slight he wasn't sure if the tall man had heard, but immediately he could hear the tall man moving frantically in his direction. Recklessly crashing over tables and chairs, Cytanis lost all pretense of silence and ran for the exit, keeping one of his bound arms pressed against the wall as much as possible.

When he came to the doorway he walked straight out, to the opposite side of the hallway, and then began his slow creep again.

Cytanis had beat the tall man to the exit. He could hear him still crashing his way around in the room, but knew he would soon find the exit as well. The hallway was so wide though it could be confused with an entirely new room. The tall man stopped after entering the hallway realizing he wasn't going to catch Cytanis.

"I'll make you a deal." The tall man said at a normal speaking voice. Cytanis paused to listen. "I'll make you a really good deal. You and I can loot this place, live like kings. I'm real sorry about your arm and everything. I made a mistake."

The pleas continued in that fashion while Cytanis started easing down the hallway. Forty-four, forty-three, forty-two he kept counting in his head. The tall man kept talking but the sound of his voice kept getting fainter and fainter before finally disappearing altogether. At one point he thought he might have heard hysterical screaming but couldn't be sure.

Thirty-two, thirty-one, thirty.

Eventually he counted down to one, turned to face where he thought the hole would be, and slowly walked across the hallway, but found only smooth wall. Immediately he started second guessing himself. Did he go left, or right out of the room? Did he make the correct count? Then he felt it, slightly to the left a crack in the wall, and then the hole he was desperately searching for.

Joy leapt into his chest as he felt his way to the gap.

In complete darkness the way up to the crevice was going to be even harder to navigate, but heading up had always been easier than heading down. There were several branching paths but as long as he kept heading up he'd find his way sure the tall man never would.

He had no idea what he'd do when he got to the surface.