

Lost

Steven tried to stretch his shoulders, but the rope binding his hands behind his back allowed for little relief. It was useless, but he couldn't help trying. After all, he didn't have much else to do, except walk. And sweat. At least there was less sweating now. The sun had finally dropped below the highest branches of the dogwoods and willows, providing a blessed bit of shade from time to time. Of course it also shone right in his eyes, forcing him to stare at a point two paces ahead. Right at Mother's mud caked boots.

It probably should have surprised him when he awoke to Mother slipping a rope around his neck and tying his wrists. After all, she hadn't taken him anywhere in his thirteen years. Then again, maybe it shouldn't have. He'd suspected for a few days something was amiss. Mother had been happy. Smiling happy. And smiles were as foreign to her face as warm food was to his bowl. He even caught her humming to herself as she brushed her long fiery red hair, the only thing he figured she loved in the whole of their dirty hovel. She'd been happy for sure, and that didn't mean anything good for him.

A tug on the rope strung from his neck yanked his thoughts back to more immediate problems. She was walking faster now, her legs pumping through the muck of the swamp at a rate he never would have imagined. Mother was no friend of work, not real work anyway. That's what she kept him around for, as she was fond of reminding him.

"Hurry up, *boy*." She spat the word at him as though it were the worst insult she could conjure. Another sign she was in a good mood. If she was really mad she'd use his name.

"Yes, Mother." He couldn't remember the last time he'd said anything else to her, but it satisfied her. She even stopped, though he knew better than to think it was for him.

She squinted ahead as he struggled up the side of an embankment, and the thick odor of rot sank into his brain. Her eyes were wide, searching all around as if seeking some landmark in the marshy maze. The sun shone through the unruly hair that floated about her head, reminding him for a moment of the fall leaves on the tree behind their dilapidated shack.

“Where is it, where is it, where is it?” She muttered. “He said west, and I went west, but I don’t see it.” She wrung her hands for a moment then patted down her errant hair.

Steven had no idea what she was talking about. No one ever visited them. And she hadn’t left the house for months. Whatever she was trying to find, it only existed in her mind.

She started off again with a jerk, just as he was mounting the small, mercifully dry, hillock. Her controlled stumble down the other side jerked him forward, nearly pulling him clean off his feet before he could get them moving to keep pace. He just hoped she tied him off somewhere dry tonight. Maybe even somewhere he could see a few stars.

But stars were not in Steven’s immediate future. As the sun dipped below the horizon it set fire to a long low bank of clouds. Which of course meant rain—the only thing that could make this journey through the swamp any worse.

They stopped as the last of the stars winked out and the cold spring rain started. They were in a small clearing of sucking mud that rose past his ankles. Surrounding them, the fetid alders grew thick, as each tried to choke the life out of its neighbors. The clearing was dotted here and there with dark pools that rippled with the impact of each drop of rain. At least he hoped the ripples were rain. Steven didn’t want to guess how deep those pools might be, or what might call them home, but he assumed they were the source of the putrid stench filling the space.

He jumped as a frog croaked somewhere nearby, the grating sound soon echoed by a chorus of its brothers. Flies, ever present the entire trek, thought better than to spend their evening here. But Steven wasn’t sure he liked the idea of hundreds of frogs any better. At least there weren’t any snakes. He hated snakes.

As if on cue, something long and narrow slid over and between his feet.

“Eeeeeee!” The scream came out before he could stop it.

“Shut your hole, boy.”

Mother was pacing the length of his leash, muttering to herself, her face furious and ecstatic by intervals.

Steven clamped his mouth shut and tried to stop the shaking.

Please. Please, if there is anything good and happy in this world that looks after children. Please, let her give up searching for whatever it is. Please let us go home. He prayed to the same nameless, evidently powerless, *whatever* he always prayed to. It rarely worked, but it was something to do. Anything was better than listening to the infernal croaking and echoed plops of the frogs around him.

Then it all stopped. And the abrupt silence, punctuated only by the steady patter of rain, echoed in his ears louder than a hundred frogs. Mother stopped too, rooted in place as surely as one of the alders around them as her gaze shifted around and a small, excited whine escaped her barely parted lips.

Steven wanted to sit down, to curl up and hide. Something was watching them. He could feel it now, out there in the dark and quiet. The whole diseased swamp watched them. Two intruders into a place no human had a right to be.

He heard them first. Soft hissing spread from the unseen trees around them, first on one side then answered on another. Steven tried to follow them, to recognize them, but it was too dark, and the sounds came from too many directions.

A dull blue flame blossomed in midair, sputtering and hissing in the rain. Steven dropped back a step, squinting against the sudden light. It didn't move. It didn't go out.

Large, sickly green eyes materialized over the flame and Steven stumbled back. His fall jerked the rope out of Mother's limp grasp, and he landed on his butt in the mud. His hands, trapped beneath him, squeezed small slithering things beneath them that wriggled against his palms in a desperate attempt to get free.

He tried to scream, tried to say anything, but the only sound that came out was a soft whimper.