

Riley Shea

The Tunnel

He fell. He couldn't tell you how long he fell, but time seemed to stretch on forever. At last, he landed with a dull thud but broke not a single bone.

A peculiar aspect of the pit he was thrown into, there's no acceleration to terminal velocity, he simply fell at the speed he was sent in with.

He struggled to a standing position, unable to see his surroundings. Voices called to him in whispers he couldn't comprehend.

He walked for hours, navigating the hellhole of vicious, jagged rocks. Several times he screamed for help. The whispers would stop every time he did as if they were fleeing his plea.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness eventually. Not enough to see anywhere near perfect, but he was able to make out shades of grey amongst the black.

Eventually, he came up upon an especially tight and sharp part of the tunnel he had been following since he landed in the pit. Seeing no other way to go, he took a deep breath, steeled himself, and pushed through the passageway.

Surprisingly, the rocks only nicked him a few times, he was able to make it out almost unscathed.

The whispers got louder at this point. Some of them were audible to him now.

"... a fluke."

"...next tunnel ...even worse."

"...still got scratched."

He grit his teeth and pushed on despite the voices. Once in a while when he grew comfortable and his guard was down, he'd walk right into another jagged rock, cutting himself on it.

He cursed, the slow trickle of blood staining his dirtied clothes. Time stretched on forever in this cavern. Soon, his old wounds would be forgotten, only to be replaced with new ones.

It grew to the point that he started to acknowledge these wounds, they gave him a sensation in this otherwise oppressive world.

That was until infection set in on one. He knew it by the acrid smell of the wound and the burning, itching sensation that came from it at all times of day. It was maddening.

Eventually, he found a respite in the cave, a small clump of glowing moss. It didn't produce light per say, but it gave his eyes something to focus on in the darkness.

He found that placing the moss on his wound cause it to heal, but the light of the moss dimmed slightly. At one point, the light in the moss died out. He kept holding on to it for a little longer but dropped it when he realized there was no sign of its glow returning.

On several more occasions, he was scratched by the tunnels, but his skin was toughened by all his past encounters, so the wounds barely hurt anymore.

He learned there was a system to these tunnels and could avoid the most damaging spots now. Sometimes he would simply hit them with all of his force, breaking the problem away.

One day, he accidentally kicked a loose object at his feet. He found it was a fruit of some kind. He realized that he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten something.

Ravenously, he tore into the fruit, finding it to be fulfilling and delicious. For a time, he felt better, but the fruit was forgotten in the tunnels.

That is until he discovered another. This time there were two fruits and they were sitting on another clump of glowing moss.

He savored each fruit, trying to make them last as long as possible. The second fruit turned out to be tainted and he fell ill for days. The voices returned even louder than before. They told him the tunnels ahead would be even worse.

He screamed and pounded the walls around him. Blood dripping from his hands, he realized that in his tirade he had forgotten which way he had been walking.

With nothing to guide him, he chose a direction and continued onward. This proved to be the incorrect choice as eventually, he stumbled over rubble from breaking the sharp projections coming from the tunnels.

He turned around, letting out a deep sigh. The glowing moss was somewhat more plentiful and he would use it to rejuvenate his wounds if needed before continuing forward.

He stumbled into a pile of fruit at one point. What a glorious feast that was. He stayed until he could tolerate the fruit no more. He had become too accustomed to the flavor and it no longer had the same effect it once did.

Further down the tunnel, he started to come across other forms of food and even drink. Each one was varied in flavor and felt as if it gave him more life. His feet hurt less from all the walking, his wounds would heal quicker, and the voices were all but gone.

And then encountered a new food choice. This one was the most delicious food he had found yet. It satisfied, it had just the right texture to it, and it kept him feeling full and ready to continue down the tunnel.

This food was plentiful, so he kept as much as he could carry with him. Life became peaceful during this time, he would eat his fill and find more each day to replenish his stocks.

He never became sick of this food, its flavor never lost its appeal. Until one day when the food was suddenly gone. He searched for hours on end, unable to find a single morsel left. It has disappeared without a trace.

He despaired for days before getting up and dusting himself off. He continued to walk. He had many days of travel to make up for all the time this food lost him. Progress had all but stalled upon finding this food and now he was moving forward once more.

Other foods were less appealing to him and he longed for the sustenance he once had, but he realized it had crippled his progress. He began to look at the other fruits with a new perspective. Eating them together allowed him to experience flavors he had not before.

And then he fell. Again.

He lost focus for a moment and stumbled into a hole that took him even deeper down in the tunnels. The walls of the hole turned out to be completely smooth and he was unable to climb back up to the original tunnels.

The voices returned, shouting that this would always happen. When he least expected it, he would fall once more.

At last, he stood up to these voices. He bellowed a challenge, daring the voices to stop him. The journey through these tunnels was longer and harder than ever before. In some spots, even the floor would be covered with jagged rocks that would stab into his bare feet.

He did not care, all of the walking had toughened his feet to the point where he could not even feel this.

His determination took him farther and farther into the tunnels. Time blended and he had no idea how long he had been walking between periods of rest. That is until he hit a wall. Looking around, there was no way through.

The voices laughed and taunted, telling him he was doomed and would have to turn back. He decided to take matters into his own hands.

He grabbed rocks from around him and spent days hammering at the wall in front of him. Bit by bit, he chipped away at this wall. From the sound it made, he could tell there was more on the other side of this wall and it was just a barrier in the way of his progress.

Eventually, he broke down this wall. There was no fruit waiting for him, but he had realized he didn't need it. He found that he could sustain himself through sheer force of will. He didn't need the food and drink to keep the voices back.

They had learned he was not one to be challenged as they could not win. One last time the voices tried. They spoke of all his past failures, that he should not have gotten up each day.

He was beyond these voices. He realized all along the voices had been there, even when he thought they had gone away. The foods he was eating simply blocked him from hearing them. But that also prevented him from learning their tricks.

Armed with knowledge and understanding, he forged a path forward. He came upon something he had not seen in all of his travels up to this point. A door. He grabbed the handle, turned, and opened it.

And at last, there was light.