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ESCORT

LAUGHED



Escort laughed. He laughed a deep, bellowing laugh that would have warmed even the coldest of souls and softened even the hardest of hearts. Well, it would have if they had ever heard it. The Wanderer was too busy snapping his silly little twigs to hear Escort's chortle.

"That isn't working," Escort called to the Wanderer.

The Wanderer threw his sticks into the glass shards at his feet, "No, really!? I had no idea. Why don't you do something about it!? Couldn't you just start the fire instead of standing there watching me do it?"

"That's not in my job description," Escort said, and started laughing again.

"What are you laughing at!?" The Wanderer kicked some of the glass shards at Escort. He missed, but neither of them had really expected anything else. The Wanderer wanted to cry, but he wouldn't let Escort know that.

"Remember who you're trying to hide your tears from, Wanderer," Escort said.

The Wanderer buried his face in his bandaged hands. Of course. He should know by now that he couldn't hide anything from his only companion in this wilderness. The Wanderer let the hot water fall from his eyes.

"Why don't you just build the fire?" The Wanderer mumbled into his bandages, "You could, do you just enjoy watching me suffer?"

"No," said Escort, "But I *do* enjoy watching you *grow*."

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"Really? I thought it did. Huh. Guess not."

The Wanderer looked up. Through his tears, he looked at the reflection of the moon on the endless shimmering desert of shattered glass. The huge silvery-white sphere seemed to stretch across the endless expanse, as though it was an ocean. "Why am I even here? What am I doing?"

"*What are you talking about!*?" Escort grabbed his long silver hair in frustration, "Logic and memory, Wanderer! *Logic and memory!* Can't you use reason? Don't you remember? If you can't call to mind the *logic and memories* that brought you here, I can't help you!" Escort took a deep breath.

"It can't be worth all this," Wanderer cried. Then he shouted, "It can't be worth all this!"

"What makes you say that?"

The Wanderer barked a laugh of sarcasm and hatred, “What do you think!? I’ve been walking through this desert for six hundred and thirty two days!”

“And you still have three hundred and sixty nine to go,” Escort reminded him.

“I’ve frozen, I’ve starved, I’ve bled, I’ve cried, I’ve wandered, I’ve wondered, I’ve lost, and I’ve *waited*. What else do you want from me?”

Escort tapped his chin, “That’s a good question. . .” He started to pace. The glass shards cracked under the magnificently made steel boots that protected his feet from the glass. Then, he stopped and looked straight at the Wanderer. He stood silhouetted against the moon. His silver hair and eyes shone brilliantly as he leaned down and whispered, “*I want your shoes.*”

The Wanderer’s brain ground to a halt, “What?” It was like he was trying to understand a color he’d never seen before. Escort had been cruel to him before. He’d left the Wanderer to flounder hopelessly time and time again. But asking for the Wanderer’s *shoes*? Here, in this desert of endless broken glass? Escort truly was the cruelest being, human or otherwise, that the Wanderer had ever met. So he repeated, “What?”

Escort was deadly serious, “Give me your shoes, Wanderer.”

The Wanderer’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened, “Y-you’re crazy!” He looked around as though hoping to see that he was hallucinating, or dreaming, or. . . anything! “*You’re crazy!*” He repeated, “I’m not doin’ it! I’m not! Nothing is worth walking through this place barefoot for another four hundred days! I’m going back. You can’t make me! I’m leaving!”

“Who said you’d be going barefoot?” Escort sounded like he was trying to understand the flawed logic of a whining toddler, “I don’t remember saying that. Also, it’s only three hundred sixty nine days.”

“I’m leaving! You can’t stop me!”

“I wouldn’t *try* to stop you, Wanderer,” Escort said very calmly, “I can’t follow you when you don’t want me to.”

The Wanderer picked up his backpack and hoisted it onto his shoulder. He stepped forward, perhaps with more force than was truly necessary. He took a few angry, heated steps, then stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Escort was gone. Now, the Wanderer’s only company was the moon. And even that seemed to shine less brightly now. In fact, as the Wanderer kept taking steps, he felt as though it kept shining less and less brightly.

Still, the Wanderer kept moving forward, away from what he knew, and towards that which he didn't. That wasn't a bad thing, he'd gone into the unknown numerous times, but always, always, he'd had Escort by his side.

The thought of Escort made the Wanderer shudder. He didn't like thinking about that being now. It made him feel. . . frightened. It wasn't the *only* thing that frightened the Wanderer now. Now, the Wanderer was alone, in the cold, getting colder, and the dark, getting darker, and the unknown pressing in, and always, always that pressing loneliness.

"I should stop walking away and go back," He said aloud. He hadn't even intended to say it. The words just fell out of him. Then he scolded himself. He couldn't turn back, Escort would think he was weak if he did that. What would everyone else say if they found out he had to come back to someone like Escort for help? They'd laugh at him. No, the Wanderer had to do this alone. He was sure he could. Why would he need someone like Escort? He had always survived without him just fine before.

"You know that's not true," He said aloud again. He hadn't intended to say *that*, either. Of course it was true! Escort had always said, "reason and memory." Well, the Wanderer could *reason* his way through Escort's lies.

"You need him," He said aloud a third time. This time, instead of just mentally chiding himself for saying it, he screamed. He screamed in rage, though he wasn't exactly sure what he was screaming at. At first, he thought he was screaming in rage at Escort, but he thought there was something deeper. Maybe. He didn't have time to think about it right now. He had to keep walking.

In all this time, the Wanderer had almost forgotten about how the moon had started becoming darker and darker. Almost. It scared him. But then he made it into a challenge. If he didn't need Escort for guidance, he didn't need the moon for light. Just to prove it, he would keep walking until the moon was completely gone. Then keep going. He didn't need Escort, he didn't need light. He had everything he needed, in his mind, and on his back.

So the Wanderer kept going. On and on, just thinking about how much further he would have to go until the moon would be completely dark. It went on for hours, stepping through that horrorscape of broken glass, watching his one source of light grow fainter and fainter. Eventually, he was sure that it would go out for sure. It was so close. Just a few more steps. Just

a few more. Why was it still there? Just the faintest hint of light still showed. *Just a few more steps. Just a few more.* Why was it so hard to be rid of!?

“Come on!” He shouted at what was left of the moon. He took ten more steps. Then another ten. It was still there, “You’d better be gone on my next step!” he shouted. He set his foot down, and to his own shock, it worked. The moon went completely black.

A new kind of fear gripped the Wanderer. Something indescribable unless someone had been there, right then, in the Wanderer’s place.

The Wanderer, trembling, took a deep breath. The air was even colder now. He felt himself freezing. But he had to keep moving. This was what he wanted. He lifted his foot with some great effort, and set it down. He didn’t put all of his weight on it at first. He was too scared now. Then, when he did finally complete the step, the glass shifted below him, making him lose his balance. The Wanderer gasped as he fell forward. He caught himself with his hands.

The shards of glass cut clean through his already tattered pants, and cut right through the bandages on his legs. Though more painfully, the glass cut through the bandages on his hands as he caught himself. Those scars had just begun to heal, and now they were being torn right open again.

The Wanderer steamed. Not in anger this time, but in sheer pain. He screamed no words. At least, he didn’t think he screamed words. He couldn’t quite remember. He *did* remember looking down. He could feel his wet blood soaking the bandages. But now, there was no light to see the blood by. Everything was dark. He started to breathe, fast and shallowly. He would die. He wanted to call for Escort’s help. Escort could help him heal, he knew that. Escort had healed him before.

No! The Wanderer didn’t need help from anyone! He could pick himself up just fine. So the Wanderer tried this. He tried to give his legs the strength to stand. He might as well have tried to enact his will upon the wind, thousands of miles away, using nothing but his breath. He knew he needed to call on Escort. Why didn’t he? No, he didn’t need Escort’s help, he could do it! He knew he could! He tried to stand again, and only ended up digging the glass in deeper. He screamed again.

“Escort! Where are you!?” He shouted into the dark, cold void. Nothing happened. Had Escort forsaken him? Yes, that was it. Escort had forsaken the Wanderer. He was sure of it. He hung his head and cried. His bloody hands were starting to freeze. Everything around him was falling

apart. Hardly knowing what he was doing, the Wanderer called out again, ‘Escort! Please! I need your help!’ Still, nothing. The minutes moved as fast as a glacier, before the Wanderer finally called out a third time, ‘I’m sorry!’

Before the Wanderer even knew what was happening, the sky lit up with the rays of the moon. It almost hurt to look at after the darkness. The air was now only cold instead of freezing. Escort was already undoing the old, tattered bandages on the Wanderer’s hands. A fire blazed, probably magically summoned by Escort, with two comfortable looking chairs, which Escort led the Wanderer to and gestured for him to sit.

‘It’s okay. It’s okay,’ Escort said, ‘I forgive you. It wasn’t the first time you’ve left. It won’t be the last. I’ll always come back.’ Escort moved slowly and gently as he uncovered the Wanderer’s wounded hand.

With the light of the moon, the Wanderer could see the bloody, torn cloth. His legs screamed at him. He wanted to sit down, but where could he sit in this place without suffering even more pain?

Escort undid the last of the bandages. His hands now had blood on them, as well, ‘Hold out your hands.’ Escort told him, ‘and close your eyes. And don’t flinch.’

The Wanderer did so. He held his hands, palms upward, closed his eyes, and waited. He felt the tip of Escort’s fingers in the very center of his palm. If it had been anyone else, it would have hurt. As it was, Escort’s touch was more gentle than any other. Warmth slowly spread from Escort’s fingertips until it filled every part of the Wanderer’s body. The warmth grew and grew, until it was nearly hotter than the Wanderer could bear. Escort’s fingers felt like iron rods that had been sitting in the blacksmith’s fire. Still, the Wanderer remembered what Escort had said. He forced his hands to stay where they were. Then, as the heat became unbearable, as the Wanderer was sure that he would die from the heat that filled his body, it was over. The heat didn’t even need time to fade away. It was simply gone. No pain. No aches. No building fire on his skin. Just a slight tingling.

The Wanderer looked at his hands in wonder. They were still bleeding, but he couldn’t feel it. He blinked a few times, confused.

‘You didn’t heal my hands,’ the Wanderer said. He wasn’t being critical as he had been before, he was just confused, ‘You’ve never healed my hands. Why?’

Escort didn’t answer at first. Instead, he just held the bandages in his hands. He gave them a flick like he was trying to remove any wrinkles from

them. In an instant, the bandages were clean and perfectly intact. He began to rewrap the Wanderer's hands, "Healing your hands is one thing I cannot do. Understand, I have the power to do so. I do not because I am bound by my oath."

The Wanderer didn't understand. He remembered that Escort had talked about his oath hundreds of times. He still didn't understand it. The oath seemed to change every time it was brought up. Sometimes, it allowed Escort to do something, and other times it obligated him to do it. The Wanderer couldn't figure it out.

"Now," Escort took advantage of the Wanderer's silence, "You asked why you were here. So tell me. Why are you here?"

"You already know, why don't you tell me?"

"I'm trying to."

"I . . ." The Wanderer squinted and thought.

Escort waited, then said his favorite words, "Logic and memory."

The Wanderer struggled for minutes before he finally spoke, "I came for . . . something."

"What was it?"

"It was. . ."

"Remember."

The Wanderer tried. He strained his brain. Remembering *anything* was hard in this place. But *this* seemed particularly difficult. He knew he had come here for a reason, but he couldn't remember.

"I came to get a vial of liquid starlight," He finally remembered. And as soon as he had the thought, he remembered everything. He'd once seen a vial of liquid starlight, in a dream, behind eight inches of glass, with four armed guards. He knew of them, of course. Everyone had at least *heard* of the legendary objects. Though not many believed in them. He didn't quite know what it would do, or what it meant. But if it was a millionth as glorious as it appeared in his dreams, or in the legends, it was worth any amount of pain. The Wanderer started to cry again. He couldn't tell why. "It's worth it," he said.

Escort said nothing for a moment. He just nodded and smiled, then said, "And what do you know you need to do for it?"

"I have to travel a thousand and one days in the desert of glass, with only Escort as my guide."

"Exactly. And what happens at the end of that?"

“Then, on the last night, someone you know very well comes to you and . . . and hands you the vial.”

“And do you know who that is?” Escort smiled even wider.

The Wanderer’s heart skipped a beat, “A-are you going to tell me!?” He had never been allowed that information. It shocked him, and excited him. He desperately wanted to know who would come to him with that vial.

“No.”

“What?”

“But I want to know who you think it’s going to be.”

“I . . .” the Wanderer was still struggling, and still crying, and still didn’t know why, “It doesn’t matter who I think it is. I know who I *hope* it is. If it is or isn’t. . . I don’t believe I can ‘think’ it’s anyone. Not until they actually deliver the vial to me.”

Escort nodded, “That is very wise, Wanderer. You are right of course. You don’t know.” It seemed like a sort of death sentence, until Escort finished, “But you have to keep hoping for *somebody*. If you don’t *hope* that it’ll happen, it *can’t* happen at all.”

“So why can’t you tell me who it is, so I know what to hope for?”

“I’m bound by my oath,” Escort rolled his eyes as though this should have been obvious.

“Right, right. Your oath.”

The two of them just sat there for the longest silence yet. There was nothing more to say. Until finally a question started to form in the Wanderer’s head. It resonated louder and louder until he finally voiced it.

“So what do we do now?” He asked.

Escort smiled, “I need your shoes.”

The Wanderer squinted, more confused than ever, “But. . . Why? How? Why do you need them? How am I supposed to. . . you know, walk through the glass if I don’t have my shoes?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You’re oath, I guess. . . Well, I’m sorry, I just don’t see how I can do it. Maybe if you gave me a reason why.”

“You can’t get to a vial of liquid starlight unless you do it.”

“But why? How does that make sense!? I don’t understand!”

“I didn’t ask you to understand. I just asked you to give me your shoes.”

The Wanderer shook his head in disbelief. He was about to refuse again. But then he thought about that vial. He remembered his dream. It



was more glorious than words can express, more than the human mind could even compute. He knew it was going through this desert barefoot. So the Wanderer closed his eyes, not wanting to see himself do the most foolish thing imaginable. He reached down and pulled off his right shoe, then his left, careful not to let either bare foot touch the ground. He let the empty shoes hit the glass ground with a clinking sound. Still with his eyes closed, he set his feet down on the ground, preparing himself for the incredible pain that would surely follow.

The pain, however, did not come. The Wanderer, shocked, opened his eyes and looked down. There, on his feet, were masterfully crafted steel boots, exactly like the ones on Escort's feet. No glass could ever penetrate that. The Wanderer's feet were safe now. He looked at Escort with wide eyes and grateful tears started to roll down his face. He looked down at the old shoes and picked them up. Still with a shocked expression, he handed them to Escort, who turned, and with a mighty thrust of his arm, threw the shoes straight up in the air. They didn't come back down. They simply vanished.

The Wanderer stood and danced around, for the first time, truly enjoying the sound of glass under his perfectly protected feet. As he did so, Escort laughed.