

A CREATURE OF THE MIND

"A STRANGE CREATURE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE IS ENCOUNTERED IN THE GROVE, WHAT HAPPENS?"

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THE WORLDHOPPER BRUSHED THE LEAVES ASIDE as they traversed the path that was slowly being worn down by their daily travels. Her footsteps were muffled against the fertile soil and still soft leaves that had fallen. *Maybe I should start walking a different way*, she thought, feeling bad that she was disturbing the effervescent scenery of the forest she had discovered only a few days prior. If she could ignore the instinct inside of her telling her to keep exploring for little bits of buds and treasures, perhaps she would stop coming to the Grove altogether. It was a thought, at least.

"...eighteen, nineteen, acorns aplenty. Twenty-one, twenty-two, good for you. Twenty-three, twenty—Who goes there?! Oh, it's you." The small sprout, Cro, cranes their neck up to look at you. There are two distinct piles of acorns around them, presumably from what they collected since the last time you saw them the day before. Quickly, they stand up, shifting their collection as they do so to make room for you. "Have you found out anything about my Grove yet?"

The Worldhopper shook her head, as she had for the past few days. Despite venturing out with Cro, Trout, and the various peddlers from Peddler's Port, she had yet to learn anything about the thick vines that the small Sprout claimed to rule.

Cro carried on with the daily spiel in the same repetitive way that people most often spoke to the Worldhopper. "In the meantime, I can give you Grove Treasures for Grove Buds."

The Worldhopper grinned and held out ten Buds that she had gathered from plants around the Grove. Even though she could make the transformation herself using her alchemy cauldron, she figured that Cro might be lonely on their own. After all, had the Worldhopper herself not felt that isolation of not knowing anyone else of your kind? Cro handed her back two little Grove Treasures to be used at the sprout's shop.

"Here you go," Cro chirped. "Thanks for your..."

The Worldhopper tilted her head when the pause between Cro's practiced words was longer than usual. She narrowed her eyes at the little creature. Their bright green skin had paled, and their stature appeared to be shrinking. The typical expression of smugness and joy they always wore was replaced by a wide-eyed fear. They were staring at something behind the Worldhopper. Trembling.

The Worldhopper's nerves shot up in response to seeing the usually brave sprout so scared. She moved closer towards Cro in a protective manner, ready to protect them in case something happened. A deep breath was taken to prepare herself before she turned around to see two glowing eyes staring at the Worldhopper and Cro.

The eyes were a pale, startling blue. Blue as the sky above Verdant Fields on a summer day. The eyes were roughly waist-level with the Worldhopper, but she knew that height was no

factor in determining the ferocity and dangerousness of a potential threat. She bared her teeth as if she were a wild animal herself, trying to communicate that she, too, was an adversary not to be messed with.

The clattering sound of acorns hitting each other and the ground rang out from behind her. She whipped her head around, looking at Cro first, but soon discovered that the noise came from a different Sprout. "I found more acorns for you, Cro!" Trout declared as they re-entered the small clearing of the leaves, which seemed to naturally part away from him as if they, too, were sentient. His small figure was crouched over the larger of the two piles of acorns, a rare smile on his face, something that made the yellow twinkle on his forehead shine brighter.

Cro loudly made a shushing sound aimed at her fellow sprout. His eyes narrowed in confusion before looking beyond the Worldhopper and seeing the pair of eyes. A gasp escaped his lips as he ran to cower alongside Cro behind the Worldhopper. Once again, the protective instinct surged over her as she faced the ominous eyes.

The two blue dots had gotten larger, closer. She tightened her fists, digging her nails into the palm of her hand. The Worldhopper straightened up and stood tall, ready to fight if needed...but her instincts told her no. Those darn instincts. They had yet to lead her wrong, even though she didn't quite understand them sometimes. Sighing a tiny bit, she extended her hand outwards and crouched down, as if she were reaching out for a skittish cat. She squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the worst.

A few seconds went by before, contrary to what she expected, a gentle sniffing could be heard. She opened one eye, then the other. The Worldhopper smiled at the triangle-faced creature. It looked like an animated creature. Something from the Grove had responded to her presence, coming to live in the form of a cute little pet that resembled a parsnip. The pet itself has a triangle that looked like something conjured by the spirit of Pann themselves growing from their face. The once menacing eyes were soft and round, the blue hue seemingly leaking into the coloration of the pet from its head to its chest. It had leafy ears and a root-like tail that was swaying back and forth, low to the ground in caution. Carefully, it got closer to the Worldhopper. It had a surprisingly slobbery tongue, she discovered as it licked her face from chin to cheek.

As the Worldhopper laughed gleefully at the pet, Cro and Trout crept out from behind her, still wary. "Who are you?!" Cro shouted at the parsnipling, their voice much stronger than they appeared to be.

Trout got closer to the pet than Cro did. "The Worldhopper has shown me things like this before," he explained. "Little creatures they bring to life over time. I like the ones made of plants the best." He tentatively reached a hand out to pet the parsnipling. The Worldhopper nodded to Trout, signaling him to delicately pet the creature, who responded by wagging its tail harder. Cro seemed less afraid, seeing that Trout didn't mind the pet.

An idea popped inside the Worldhopper's head. She leaned over and whispered it to Trout, putting her hand up in case Cro could read lips. His eyes widened and he nodded along to her words. Once she was finished, he gave her a thumbs up with his grubby little turnip hand. Trout turned to Cro, stepping closer to her.

“The Worldhopper wants to know if you would want to keep this pet.” Trout relayed the message of the Worldhopper’s idea to Cro. The parsnipling eagerly bowed to Cro, sniffing them happily and curling up beside them.

They gasped. “W-what? Keep it?” The Worldhopper shook her head up and down. “I don’t know, I...” There was a long silence as Cro slowly and carefully pet the parsnipling, contemplating the offer. “It does get fairly lonely being in the Grove by myself, I suppose.” They looked at Trout. “And I can’t suppose that you’ll stay here with me forever. You have your own kingdom to rule.” Trout opened his mouth to correct them, but refrained, realising it would be difficult to explain. The Worldhopper felt that time slowed while waiting for a decision. She so desperately wanted Cro to not be lonely anymore. Nobody deserves solitude. Cro looked at the Worldhopper with eager eyes. “I’ll keep them!”

The Worldhopper felt a rush of joy as Cro agreed to keep the parsnipling. Happily, she asked Cro to think of a name for the pet. Cro thought for a solid three seconds before declaring the name for their new friend in the Grove: “Acorn!”