

>>>> KEY

italicized and tabbed: *journal entry- written text from the characters*

In journal entries: Ritts is lowercase, PHANGG IS UPPERCASE

Uncle is also lowercase (towards the end).

//italicized with double slashes are characters talking while writing the in the journal.

>>>> 'Island Hopping - Let's try this again.'

COZY WARM BEDROOM AT THEIR HOME ON THE SURFACE WHERE THEY SHOULD STAY AND NOT LEAVE - NIGHT

No matter how many times Phangg's gaze traveled up, toward the islands that speckled the sky, he didn't really get all the fuss. Sure, the view was nice during the day, but it made stargazing nigh impossible at night- the huge chunks of rock scattered every constellation he knew was there.

Which, he didn't even know why that thought upset him, he'd never really been interested in the stars *either*. The surface lakes were plenty cool, had *fish*, and didn't have thousands of things obstructing their exterior, so he didn't know why the mere idea irked him.

Although...there were other things he still appreciated about them though, it would be a lie if he stated otherwise, not that he was opposed to exaggerating or anything. He cared for the thousands of waterfalls that fell nonstop from their edges down to the surface, and he cared for the murals that decorated each island's warp pads far below them, depicting different walks of life he had once wanted to see.

Wanted. Y'know, as in the past tense. That ship has sailed!

Or, rather... it has been docked? Permanently. At home, where nothing would...well, he'd just rather stay at home and leave it at that.

So, no, if you asked him now, he really didn't get all the hype over some giant hunks of ground. They just seemed...lame? Stupid, awful, obnoxious...yeah, obnoxious was a good word for it, actually. They were just obnoxious little sky rocks that the surface people blindly *looked up to*. (Hey, he'll take a pun wherever he can.)

And there wasn't a thing in the world that could change his mind about it. He's stubborn like that.

ESPECIALLY not Uncle. And especially not *now*. Phangg didn't want to hear anything that man had to say about their negligence to their '*sacred duty*' as Surface Dwellers or whatever. Pa always blabbed on and on about the perfect islands in the sky day in and day out, and yet not even *once* did he think to warn Phangg and his little brother about the horrors.

Okay, maybe he *did*, but he should have, like, worded it better.

Ritts didn't seem to mind it all though, but Ritts was weird like that. Kid shouted 'Cry and die mad about it!' (lovingly rebranded as 'CaDMai' by yours truly) and 'die a thousand deaths!' at anything and anyone, it was practically a compliment at this point. He appreciated it, he really did, but he just didn't understand the optimism.

To Phangg, lying in his nice soft bed and just staying there sounded heavenly, especially after *just* getting back from what they had thought was some forced vacation their Uncle wanted them to go on.

But, alas, no such luck for poor Phangg and none for his brother either, because *UNCLE JUST TOLD THEM THEY NEED TO GO BACK ON ANOTHER 2-WEEK JOURNEY. TO THE SAME PLACES. WHERE*, may he just so gently remind you, *MONSTER*.

Admittedly, he realizes that they *didn't* do their stupid task at each island they visited as part of their '*sacred duty*.' Like, okay, *sorry*, he hadn't thought about it, but did they really have to *both* go back up? Sure, whatever, Phangg'll go, yippee (sarcasm), but did he really need to take Ritts with him again? His little brother didn't need that. Or maybe there was something else there that Phangg didn't want his little brother to deal with...but it was complicated. He didn't know what that other reason could even be.

But either way, didn't matter, because no amount of complaining or bribery sufficed with Uncle. He'd *tried* pulling that from a well as deep as the Great Lake crater, no dice.

Eughhhh, fine, if they had to go again, then *he'd* be the one to fill in the journal this time. So Pa could read and *taste* his resentment. With a huff, he padded across the bedroom he shared with his younger brother, and rifled through 'The Adventure Sack(™).' He shifted around pointless knickknacks until his fingers closed on a scuffed-up book and the darkest pencil he could find in the dim lighting.

Settling back onto his bed, he hunched over a blank page in the journal and gripped the pencil tight. Something more than irritation bubbled underneath, but it was *still*

undefined and murky. Being no stranger to pushing it away with a firm shake of the head, he squinted at the book.

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OKAY, HERE WE GO AGAIN:

*THE **DISMAL** RETURN! WE GATHER HERE TO READ THE BEGINNING OF A TERRIBLE VOYAGE, ONE SO **FORCEFULLY** EGREGIOUS AND...OTHER BIG CREEPY WORDS LIKE THAT- THAT I DEFINITELY KNOW WITHOUT HAVING TO LOOK AT MY DEAR BELOVED THESAURUS.*

YES, YES, ANYWAYS! GREETINGS AND ALL OF THAT OR WHATEVER.

WITH THE FORMALITIES OUT OF THE WAY-

*GET A LOAD OF THIS GARBAGE!!! BECAUSE, AS YOU'VE MOST DEFINITELY NOTED, WE ARE STARTING THIS IN THE **MIDDLE** OF THE BOOK. WHO DOES THAT, YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF ASKING? WHY IN THE SKY AND WHY ON THE SURFACE WOULD I START THIS GRIPPING NARRATION IN THE **MIDDLE** OF A BOOK? WELL, GOOD QUESTION, I'M WONDERING THAT TOO.*

*OH, RIGHT, THAT'S BECAUSE THIS IS **TAKE TWO**, THE UNEXPECTED, UNWANTED, AND **UNWARRANTED** SEQUEL. BOY, I CAN'T WAIT.*

IT'S STUPID BECAUSE RITTS DIDN'T EVEN SEEM TO MIND WHAT HAPPENED! I MEAN HE DID, AT FIRST, BUT LIKE. WHATEVER. NO ONE EVEN SEEMS TO CARE THAT I-

THAT-

OKAY, WHY IS WRITING SO STUPID? I USUALLY LOVE IT AND, WOW, DO I HAVE SO MUCH TO SAY, SO WHY IS NONE OF IT GETTING OUT?

*OKAY, OKAY, WHATEVER, I'LL RESTART AGAIN, (WOW, TYPICAL) LET'S GET BACK TO DISCUSSING THE TOPIC OF OUR **NEW** JOURNEY.*

*FIRST, WE GOT TO, AND THIS IS STUPID BY THE WAY, WE GOT TO--
LKDFpPDOFDSJ--~_*

--

With an unholy screech, Phangg's face was pushed away and the book was yanked from his grip. The pencil, still in his hand, made an equally offensive noise as it scraped across the paper. It absolutely ruined his introduction.

Snapping his head up and shaking the excess energy out of his hand, Phangg was greeted by his little brother, sticking his tongue out and hugging the book protectively against his chest. The nerve of that guy.

The shout that escaped his mouth wasn't fully intentional, "I THOUGHT YOU WERE SLEEPING!" But, man, did Ritts have a way of sneaking up on him. As a follow-up, Ritts was also very good at stealing things and blowing raspberries at him. Which, he just so eloquently did next, splattering spit in the air where Phangg's face had rested before he successfully ducked under an arm.

"EW, OH MY GOSH, STOP. *I'M* WRITING THE ANGSTY BEGINNING, GIVE IT BACK." His shouting lowered to a more appropriate whisper level, still too loud to warrant the attempt though, because Uncle was definitely no longer sleeping. Phangg tried to snatch the book back but his hand met open air as Ritts slid to the side. "C'mon, Ritts! It'd be a crime to let my gripping storytelling skills go to waste here. I'm adding some much-needed spice to the setup!"

His brother didn't relent, "but, Phangg, Pa said *I* could be in charge of the journal. I've written like everything in there about the first trip, it's *my* thing!"

"He did say that, I know, but he also *sent us to a place with a monster*, so, y'know, I don't really trust what he says."

"But I set the tone already! You're just gonna mess up the vibes. No angsty garbage in my book, Phangg. You leave that at the door!"

"And I love and appreciate the tone you gave it, *however*, this is take 2. A new attempt. Let me have this bro, let me have this," he pleaded. "I don't feel the fairy tale adventure vibes about it this time, and I'm not giving him that satisfaction. I want him to read my anger, my ire, my uhhhh resen-"

"Phangg,"

Oh, *ohohoh*, the look Ritts was leveling him with could make boulders crumble. *And Phangg was not as strong as a boulder.*

It wasn't quite puppy-dog eyes, it was more of a blank stare that reached into your chest and wriggled around in the way only a baby brother could. Which, bro was 12, how did he still have that power? It was unnerving, and Phangg knew better, so he tried to look away, pleading, "no, no, no. No, Ritts, don't give me that look."

But Ritts leaned forward, gosh, frick, he really did look like those toddlers who stared and stared and didn't stop and-

No, shit, he crumbled, "gHKkkg, eugh, *FINE*, take the journal! Don't expect me to help you with it, though!" That was a lie, and they both knew it, Phangg would most certainly help. Darn it! Why was he so good at that?!

"Thanks!" His brother beamed, and jeez, see that's why he always gave in.

And then, Ritts soured it immediately, "You have no sense of tone, *buuuut*, I'm still making you help. I tell you where, though. "

Phangg grimaced but didn't oppose.

Ritts hummed to himself as he folded Phangg's thwarted prologue away and flipped through the passages and drawings from the 2 weeks prior. "I'm making it cheesier this time, though. No angst. Sound good?"

"No, it does not."

"Doing it anyway."

"Wow, okay," Phangg couldn't help but chuckle, but he leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees, and gestured at nothing in particular. "Actually, what if you put something else in the journal? At the beginning, since you won't let *me* do the intro. I want it to distract me from my impending doom. *Anything*, I tell you."

"Well, I *do* kinda feel bad for not listening to Pa about our sky island mission stuff." He definitely didn't feel bad, actually.

Okay, well, maybe *Ritt's* did, but Phangg certainly didn't. When Uncle rambled, it was boring. Incredibly boring, and it never sat right with him. They rushed out of the house as soon as they could during Uncle's monologue. Yeah, sure, he hadn't finished speaking yet when they booked it, but it's not like he'd realized the two were gone until...well, y'know, they were gone and all.

“Eh... that stuff just really doesn’t stick up there in the brain like *at all*, I’m telling you,” Phangg muttered.

His brother tapped the pencil to the top of the book a few times in thought, “What about if we write an ancient legend about *why* we gotta visit the sky islands?”

“I guess? But I don’t know enough of history to do that.”

“Doesn’t matter! My version is going to be SUPER interesting and more exciting with a hero and everything! And much less uhhhh, like that um...the boring thing. Whatever.”

“Nice, smooth delivery. I’m hooked.”

“Why thank you. But, like, double win, right? Pa will like it, and it’ll finally cheer *you* up, grumpy head. Like luring a dog with treats or lowering the self-esteem and confidence of a friend or loved one before- ”

Phangg gasped affronted, gripping his chest and leaning further back onto his bed.

“*Gasp*, you take that back!” He was choosing to focus on the grumpy head comment. The rest...he’d like a follow-up later, actually, that analogy sounded intriguing.

“CaDMAi. Cry and die mad about it.”

“You’re MEAN to me.”

“That’s one of my hobbies,” Ritts said, matter of factly. Before he melted into chuckles and flopped onto his back next to his brother on the bed.

“Mhm- hmm, right, okay, fine, just write the stupid thing. Knock your shoes *and* knock your socks off, but, promise your dear older brother, that it *will* be rad as hell. Like, I’m talking blow my mind kind of cool.”

“Obviously.”

He sighed contentedly beside his brother as he stared at the ceiling, momentarily placated despite the dreadful journey revival the morning would bring.

And then Ritts punched him in the side, “I’m not letting you near this thing with crayons or glitter again, by the way.”

Great, there goes his plan to sabotage.

--

Island Hopping, Here we go again!

Documented by Ritts :3

AND PHANGG >:(

THE LEGEND: ENTRY ZERO -

- (THE SUPERIOR VERSION, OBVIOUSLY)

~~*Once upon a time,*~~

//NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT, START OVER.

// oh, sorry, starting a legend with 'Once upon a time,' is cliché and HORRIBLY boring. noted.

There once was a time, long ago, when there was apparently no surface at all. It used to be like the rest of the floating islands in the sky, sitting above some creepy dark void that went on forever probably. Or whatever was below them, no one really knows for sure, considering how far the drop was. Falling that distance seems like a pretty stupid thing to do for just some curiosity y'know, so I don't think anyone wanted to find out all that badly.

Some people say there was a huge ocean down here with islands of its own-

//which is super weird, like. islands floating in WATER? rocks don't float, they sink. obviously. they only float in the atmosphere because of the gravity.

//FOR REAL, FOR REAL.

*-others say it was actually just nothing down there, like at all. I never cared enough to actually think about it, but my big brother Phangg says it **was** just a boring dark void full of nothing or something, it doesn't really matter.*

It was probably the goo though. There was a lot of goo back then.

***Anywho!** Apparently, one day, the biggest island of them all straight up started shaking and rumbling and fell from the sky! Crashed right into the goop void. No idea what caused it though, but if you ask the right people, someone is bound to have a few ideas. Not me though, but if you give me enough time I could probably think of something fun.*

//RITTS, BUDDY, KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL. TO THE POINT.

//die.

The new surface was dry and pretty ~~much empty~~ barren except for the people who lived there. ~~They got no water from anywhere and~~ It was as if the other islands still up above blocked the rain! No water reached them and the islands blocked out the sun. They probably did, at least.

While life on the surface was sad, dark, and just generally sucked, the people who lived there were also sad and probably also generally sucked. We have to assume here, y'know, since that was like thousands of years ago maybe. 2 thousand years ago sounds right, maybe Pa said something like that.

//THIS IS THE LEGEND STILL, RITTS. I JUST SAID TO KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL.

//oh, yeah.

The surface must have gotten tired from the lack of water, because it wasn't all that long before cracks appeared in the ground, creating large ~~pits~~ basins that leaked a dark blue ooze thing. That goop stuff I said used to be the surface before it was the surface (I think).

~~The unsettling stuff was so unsettling that it unsettled everyone who looked at it so badly and those who were anywhere near it and it also sucked the life out of whatever it could.~~

//THAT SENTENCE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE, JUST, UH, JUST SAY THE GOOP WAS EVIL AND DESTROYED EVERYTHING.

The goop was so unsettling and evil that it destroyed everything it touched, I guess.

The holes in the surface bubbled like volcanoes, as volcanoes do, I think, but instead of lava, it was gross monster goo. And the goo was angry. Very angry, trying to eat up the surface island and all of its people.

*But, when ~~everything seemed to be hopeless~~ all hope seemed lost, a **hero** appeared. Some surface dweller who decided that someone should really stand up against the goop that was really starting to resemble monsters more and more. The*

hero watched the goop monsters bubble out of their craters, so ~~he thought of~~ she concocted a plan.

She held out a staff he carved out of the crystals that grew on the surface island and stood on the tallest part of the land far above the goopy craters and screamed into the sky. The people on the sky islands heard her cry and each of them reacted by sending their own power to help.

Suddenly waterfalls began ~~falling~~ descending down onto the surface from the other islands, landing directly upon the holes that the goopy stuff made. That's what formed all the surface lakes we have today. Probably. That makes sense, right?

//S'PLAUSIBLE.

The water pushed the goo back down, right back into the holes, but the monsters didn't take the baths very well. It was still very angry that the surface had gotten replaced. I think that's why it would be mad, at least.

But it didn't even matter that the water pushed them back, because the stuff started **climbing** up the waterfalls somehow! ~~Wanting to do better~~ Not to be outmatched, the surface dweller hero was met with a hero from each of the sky islands, all coming together with a secret plan to keep the goop away.

The Heroes all offered rocks from their own islands and sent them down the waterfalls, where the surface Hero grabbed them up and turned them into an orb thing. And then she made a bunch more staff and orb things just in case. The Hero and a few other surface dwellers then traveled up the waterfalls to the different islands to make the water like magic or something. At the weirdly infinite sources. The fountains.

The water that continued to fall down was now clean, filled with some anti-goop monster magic stuff and soon the goop all went away. Deep into the surface's rock and never seen again.

Apparently, it's some tradition now, to send surface dwellers up to the islands every 10 years or something. Maybe more. Several groups get sent though, never just one, to make sure the goop stays away.

//goop be gone!

//YEAH, GOOP BE GONE...

--

Mildly satisfied with the legend they'd both written down describing their people's history, Phangg decided it didn't sound *that* bad. It almost made him excited to go visit the spirit springs again for real this time.

But, y'know, that was *probably* because a lot of what they wrote was made up on the spot. Let's just say there were a lot of plot holes around what they *did* remember, so, hey, sue them for getting creative. Also, sue him for liking adventure-esque fanfiction.

ISLAND ONE: ~~Festival place~~ WATERBED PEOPLE ISLAND -

- (I BOUGHT A REALLY COOL FISH HERE LAST TIME >:))

It was an easy choice to retrace the ~~last~~ previous journey to the ~~tee~~, T.

This island was one of Phangg's favorites last time, I think, and I don't blame him. I liked it a lot too. What's not to like!

It's literally an island FULL of people who breathe underwater, and I know what you're thinking! That's silly, if the island was underwater, then why would their fountain be a fountain if the whole thing was water? Or like, HOW was the whole thing water? OH, also, you might be maybe wondering by chance how WE, two non-water-breathing surface dwellers were able to be there at all!

*Well, simple answer! I don't know!! It's not **actually** underwater, but the people, they're like these fish guys, and they have water like. IN them. So, they're okay? Uh...*

//EXPLAIN IT BETTER, BUD, WE ALL HAVE WATER IN US. IT'S PART OF LIKE, BEING ALIVE.

//uh, can you take over this part, I dunno how to explain that...

//OH, UH, SURE, SCOOT OVER.

SO, THE SIMPLE ANSWER IS THAT THEY'RE LIKE THESE FISH THINGS THAT FLOAT IN A BOWL OF WATER. BUT THE BOWL OF WATER IS SHAPED LIKE A PERSON'S BODY. THEY LOOK LIKE WATER BEDS BUT AS PEOPLE I GUESS? WHICH IS REALLY COOL, IN MY OPINION, BUT DEFINITELY REALLY WEIRD.

IN EACH OF THEIR CHESTS FLOATS ONE BIG FISH-LOOKING CREATURE AND THEY SPEAK REAL PEOPLE WORDS. AND, AS YOU SHOULD KNOW, I REALLY LIKE FISH. SO, NATURALLY, WE GOT ALONG SWIMMINGLY.

//bad pun!

//YO, SHUT UP! YOU TOLD ME TO TAKE OVER THIS PART, ITS WHAT YOU GET. CADMAI.

//gimme it back.

The waterbed people of, what we can only assume is Waterbed People Island, had this giant ~~fare~~ fair going on, like a festival kind of thing. Carnival? Farmer's market? Okay, you know what I mean. There were booths and stalls and shops and games **everywhere**, and they were all super interesting! We spent the ~~entire~~ entire time on waterbed people island there at the market. Phangg bought this absolutely massive fish and carried it around until he lost it immediately on the next island.

//I MISS THAT FISH :(

But, it was very different **this** time around. For one, the fair was smaller, and for two it was a heck of a lot less lively. There were still people to welcome us, but they didn't seem so happy...

The water in each of the waterbed people didn't look so clear or healthy anymore. Green and gross and murky, with, ~~algae~~ algae growing all over them, and the fishes themselves looked awful. I hadn't really noticed, aside from the fact that they all looked sad, but Phangg knows a lot about fish and said these guys were sick. I really **really** wanted to say it was a skill issue, but the look in Phangg's eyes told me it was actually **our** skill issue. He knew why the fish were suddenly so sick.

The spirit fountain. When we got to it, it didn't look so good either. We didn't really get a good look at it the first time around because we had been distracted by the fair thing, but I'm sure it couldn't have been **this** bad or anything. I mean like this time it was real, real bad.

It was almost dark and goopy and was definitely grosser than the water inside the waterbed people ...it looked like it was something close to that sludge the scary monster from that one island spat at us. So, I guess it's good that we know this now!

That if you leave the spring water alone for long enough it turns to goo. It sounds cool in theory, but it's really not in real life.

//GOO. YUCKEROO. HATE THAT STUFF.

Uncle's boring and all, but listening to him tell us to fix the fountain goo sounds better than having that fountain goo get everywhere and make people really really upset with us and not let us have fun on their islands anymore.

Well, it's okay! Because we fixed the spring now! We took the staff with crystals from the surface lakes in it that uncle gave us and did the thing. It was super duper super easy, you know, like for real. In fact, we were practically naturals at it, it was super cool and rad.

//YEAAAH,,,

//yeahhhhh,,,

- - - - -

AT THE FOUNTAIN - WATERBED PEOPLE ISLAND - LITERALLY ABOUT 20 MINUTES AGO -

Standing on one foot and raising his arms as high as possible, Phangg felt a bit silly. And Ritts was scrutinizing his every move, which didn't serve to make him feel any *less* silly.

"Stop staring at me like that, let me work." He sighed, "Ritts, c'mon, we just told the waterbed people to let us work in peace because we didn't want them to see us do this. Not because we don't know what we are doing, but because, uh, because we know exactly what we are doing and they'd be in shock and awe at our raw power and," he stretched his arms out even higher until he felt like his shoulders would fall off, "super intimidating might. Y'know?"

"True, true, but you're doing it wrong, Phangg. I think you just gotta- no, not like that. Stop."

"What? No, no, I'm definitely doing this right." And it was true, Phangg was *definitely* doing this thing right. Ritts was just being a little stink about it, like, bro, he's working on it. Give him a minute.

"But nothing's happening."

Literally, give him a minute.

“GhhGH. Look, I’m older, I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t think that means anything to this stick thingy. Try holding it even higher.”

“I’m not that tall Ritts, I already tried holding it as high as I can.” Phangg let his arms fall, the staff in his hand rattling as the end of it hit the ground and sending harsh vibrations from it up his arm. Perhaps he should have lowered it slower, let’s not break it or his arm, now.

“Oh! Idea. Maybe we’re not *supposed* to do anything here,” Ritts helpfully, so helpfully, suggested. “Just let it do its little purify thingy on its own.” There was no way that was the solution, but at this point, whatever.

So Phangg takes Ritts’ suggestion, and drops the staff the rest of the way to the ground, letting it slip out of his suddenly very loose grip. The staff, now lying on the grass, did absolutely nothing. Naturally.

Okay, so that was a bust.

“Aw, that’s lame,” Ritts blows a raspberry. Did he expect that to work, like, for real? Well, points for the optimism, he supposed.

Okay, wait, there *could* be something there. How about they ignore the *stick* entirely, but not the sphere? There was an orb that hung off the end of it, maybe they were supposed to take it off and just use that? It had a hole in it that could let water into it if it was indeed *supposed* to have water in it.

All he remembered uncle saying was that this thing ‘*purified the spring water,*’ whatever that meant.

Somehow. And they already tried holding the staff over the water. They had already tried holding it upright *in* the water. They tried holding it very high in a dramatic hero pose like the legend story they thought up. And lastly, they tried leaving it alone on the grass, because sure, why not.

So like. What else were they supposed to do? Give up? Yeah, maybe just go home or something, make uncle come back and do it himself.

Nah, that's stupid.

While Phangg was focused on his inner monologue, Ritts had apparently decided to take a crack at getting the staff purifier thingy to work on his own. Course, Phangg only clued back in to notice that when Ritts started physically climbing on him. The little gremlin made it all the way up to Phangg's shoulders, one boot on his shoulder and the other on his head before Phangg completely lost the fight for balance and they both toppled into the gross slimy fountain water. Ritts landed on his back, but, of course, Phangg faceplanted straight into it.

Spitting out the water and coughing perhaps more dramatically than he had to, Phangg sprung out of the water like a startled cat and rounded on his brother. "WAS THAT NECESSARY."

"What? I told you to try holding it higher, and you said you were too short," he explained. "I made us taller." Ritts was still holding the stick and orb, barely gracing the surface of the *water*, and was gesturing to it as if it helped. Well, it was in his hands until Phangg tackled his brother as the urge to knock him over overtook him.

While they were both very busy growling and fighting each other off, the staff fully submerged in the water. They rolled over it accidentally, in fact, busy grabbing at each other's horns.

And they probably would have continued to do that for a while longer had the water not started to bubble around them.

And glow. Wait why would it be glowing, it was all murky and gross. Phangg would know, he was now covered in it. Therefore, it wasn't-

-yeah, no, okay, it was definitely starting to glow the same bright green as the bright green eyes all surface dwellers had.

Phangg, still with Ritts in a loose headlock, sprung up and rushed out of the fountain at mach speed. Like, what if it was gearing up to explode or something? No thank you, no thank you, no thank you, *PleaseDoNotExplode* please, please do NOT.

Peering over the top of his brother's head, hugging Ritts to his chest, he surveyed the now suspiciously glowing and bubbling spring. Only to find that the source of said funky fountain behavior came from the staff and orb that they'd definitely placed very carefully into the water. Huh, the whole spring kinda looked like a boiling soup...

And then, inexplicably, it blew up.

Well, it didn't *blow up*, blow up, but it did have this green flash of light. And then suddenly, the water was immaculately clear. Everything around the spring too, like the coral and plant life brightened up as well.

So, at least the waterbed people were proud and happy at their, uh, fountain-purifying success. And see, that's why Phangg told the islanders to give them space. That way, the waterbed people would have their clean spring and be all happy again and not have seen the trainwreck he and his brother had to actually do the dang thing.

Now, at least, they could do it again at the next islands' springs! Um. If they could recreate it.

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//YES, SUPER VERY EASY, AND TOTALLY NOT UNEXPECTED IN ANY MANNER AT ALL WHATSOEVER, MOVING ON.

It really wasn't a hard job when we got it done. It just kind of seems like something that's...hard to get yourself to do. If that makes sense. At least now we know how to do it properly. Mostly! And! I'm kinda excited to see some of those other islands again and those ones we never got to!

Just kinda hope they aren't like. Mad at us.

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ANCIENT COWBOY ISLAND - WARP PAD ABOUT TO LEAVE -

"Hey, uh, Ritts, can I start out the entry for this island? I think I'm more offended than you are about how mean it was. I don't remember particularly asking for nightmares."

"The...the cowboy island? The one we're still on?"

"What other island would I be talking about right now? Yes, the cowboys."

"That was rude, the way you said that. But fine. I *guess* you can start it out. You did like the skeletons more than me last time and I don't really wanna think about those scary cowboys anymore...so." Ritts dropped the book, literally speaking, onto Phangg's boots.

And then, unnecessarily, he handed the pencil to him with his tail wrapped annoyingly tight around it so Phangg had to pry it off.

The older brother sighed and shook his head. Ritts made his Cain Instinct bubble to the surface sometimes, but he'd like to think he was *capable* of being very good at containing the urge to deck him (the waterbed island fountain Decking Incident notwithstanding). So, instead, he resigned himself to consoling. For now, because if Ritts pulled another stunt like throwing him face first into gross fountain sludge water again, well, he'd reevaluate the decking.

“Don't think about what they looked like then. Just think about, uh, you like birds a lot, think about birds or something instead. I will handle the thinking about the skeleton guys who used to be rad but as of like an hour ago were things right out of a horror film and oh maybe I don't want to think about them anymore either.”

Because, did he *really* want to keep dwelling on creepy skulls dripping goo out of their eye sockets, and bones gnashing on nothing but empty air, mumbling low and gurgly right now? Don't even get him started on the horses...

Phangg tries to hand the book back to Ritts anyway, even going as far as to push the closed book into his side, poking over and over again. Ritts does not react. Phangg crumbles quickly, as per unfortunately usual. “Yeah, yeah, I get it! I'll write this one. But, also thank you, now I get creative liberty.”

Ritts groaned jokingly, “and what are *you* doing with creative liberty?” He crouched down to the backpack that was resting beside the edge of the waterfall they were sitting by. The cowboy hat was moved to the side, as he opened the bag and shifted some stuff around. And then, because he sucked, Ritts grabbed the bag of candy that Phangg had been saving up and tore into it. Phangg just let him, but he did roll his eyes. Whatever.

“Oh, you know, *creative stuff*. Like, creatively finding ways to sabotage your journal.”

“WHAT!!! NO, YOU'RE NOT!!!! I'LL THINK ABOUT COWBOYS I WILL, I WILL, DON'T RUIN IT PHANGG!!!! PLEASE!!!” His little brother screeched around a full mouthful of stolen sweets. Ew.

“Spit that candy bar out then.”

Ritts stuck out his tongue, coated in half-chewed chocolate and caramel. GROSS, NEVERMIND, OKAY, *awful*. Awful.

Phangg gagged and took about six full, large steps away, before settling down on the ground crosslegged and *purposefully* facing away from his little gremlin of a sibling.

ISLAND TWO- ANCIENT COWBOY ISLAND -

(don't trust cowboys!!)

OKAY, AS MUCH AS I ENJOY SKELETONS, SKELETON HORSES, COWBOY HATS, THOSE LITTLE WHEAT THINGIES, AND ALL OF THOSE CLASSIC UNDEAD COWBOY THINGS, I REALLY REALLY DON'T ENJOY WHEN THOSE THINGS WANT TO HURT MY LITTLE BROTHER. OR ALSO WANT TO HURT ME. DON'T LIKE THAT EITHER.

NO, NO. SO, IT WAS ENTIRELY UNEXPECTED AND NOT COOL. I CANNOT STRESS THAT ENOUGH. WHY.

LIKE C'MON I LIKE HORROR MOVIES AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GUY, THEY'RE FUN TO LAUGH AT, BUT!!!! I THINK I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THESE REAL-LIFE SCARIES, ACTUALLY, THANKS.

THE LAST ISLAND, THE WATERBED PEOPLE ONE, THEY WERE STILL AT LEAST MODERATELY HAPPY TO SEE US RETURN. INVITING, EVEN, IF NOT A BIT WARY OF OUR ABILITY TO HELP THEM.

BUT THESE GUYS? THESE UNDEAD COWBOYS? TALK ABOUT GRUMPY NEIGHBORS, YEESH.

OKAY, YEAH, WE STOLE HORSES LAST TIME TO RIDE AROUND THE ANCIENT PLAINS, BUT C'MON, CAN YOU BLAME US? IT WAS REALLY FUN AND IT'S NOT LIKE WE DIDN'T RETURN THE HORSES WHEN WE WERE DONE. THEY FORGAVE US, AND LET US FEED THEM. WHICH IS RATHER SILLY BECAUSE THEY WERE SKELETONS. SKELETONS CANNOT EAT. DIDN'T STOP THEM, BUT, MAN, IT WAS ALL SORTS OF WRONG.

LIKE. SIGH, I MIGHT ACTUALLY BE SCARED OF THESE HORSES NOW OR SOMETHING. SEEING THEM LEAKING GOO AND ACTING LIKE ZOMBIES OUT TO GET US TODAY WAS MUCH WORSE THAN WATCHING HALF-CHEWED GRASS AND FRUIT FALL OUT OF THEIR RIBCAGES AND FADE OUT OF EXISTENCE LAST WEEK. I THINK I MAY BE SCARRED.

//scarred, or scared?

//I'M PRETTY SURE I JUST SAID I WAS BOTH.

//hehe, Phangg's scared of horses.

//NOT IN GENERAL!! JUST THESE GUYS!!!!

LOOK, ALL YOU, THE JOURNAL, NEED TO KNOW, IS THAT YAY YIPPEE WE DODGED THE EVIL ANKLE-BITING HORSES, WE EVADED THE GNASHING GRABBY COWBOYS, AND WE THREW THE STAFF INTO THE GROSS STINKY AWFUL FOUNTAIN AND IT EXPLODED AGAIN.

IN THE 'OH IT'S OKAY AND PURIFIED NOW' KINDA WAY, NO WORRIES. NOT NORMAL EXPLODE.

//are you really going to like, not add in the actually cool cool parts? or the fact that-

//OFF MY CASE ABOUT IT.

I GUESS I CAN ELABORATE, ALAS. WHILE EXPERTLY JUMPING OUT OF THE WAY OF A PARTICULARLY EVIL SHERRIF THROWING STAR, I MANAGED TO KNOCK OUT A COWBOY A WAYS OFF. SNIPED THEM BY VAULTING THE STAFF AT THEIR HEAD.

//you tripped on your own tail when you jumped over the throwing sheriff star, and the staff thingy flew out of your hand-

//YEAH, YEAH.

//it was still cool though. that guy went right down, and-

//AND HIS HEAD FLEW OFF, YES I REMEMBER.

FINE, I DIDN'T ACTUALLY THROW IT ON PURPOSE, BUT IT WAS A PRETTY POWERFUL THROW, THANK YOU. IT WAS KNOCK-ITS-HEAD-CLEAN-OFF-THE-REST-OF-ITS-SKELETON KIND OF STRONG.

AND Y'KNOW, KUDOS TO ME, I ONLY FROZE FOR A FEW MOMENTS IN FRIGHT, I'LL ADMIT IT, AND ALSO REVULSION BECAUSE WOW, EW. BUT, YIKES MAN, HOMEBOY (ME) WAS FLABBERGASTED (REAL).

HOWEVER...IN A HORRIBLE TURN OF EVENTS, THE FEELING OF BOTH FRIGHT AND REVULSION ONLY GREW, BECAUSE THE HORSE THAT THE POOR SHMUCK WAS RIDING ON GOT REALLY PISSY ABOUT ITS RIDER GETTING DECAPITATED. SKILL ISSUE, HONESTLY, BUT IT SNATCHED UP THE STAFF THAT LANDED NEAR THEM AND STARTED CHASING US AROUND SWINGING ITS HEAD WILDLY. A TERRIFYING SIGHT IF YOU COULD BELIEVE IT OR NOT.

I'LL CONVINCE RITTS TO DRAW A PICTURE OF IT LATER, ONCE HE CALMS DOWN ABOUT THE WHOLE THING. WHAT HAPPENED NEXT REALLY RATTLED HIM I THINK.

//oh!! can I take over to tell them how we got the fountain purified? can I? please. it was crazy!!!!

//NEVERMIND, YOU'RE FINE NOW, I GUESS. KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF. DRAW THE MURDER HORSE AFTER THIS, THOUGH, PLEASE. I CAN'T DRAW BUT I NEED OUR AUDIENCE TO SEE THE HORRORS TM.

In a very, very, very, brave course of action, if I do say so myself, I threw myself at the now rider-less weapon-wielding murder horse and I got myself on its back! I Definitely Wasn't Already In The Air from Being Thrown and Just So Happened to land on its back, it was Totally Intentional.

Anywhizzle! I steered the evil horse right towards the fountain water and it went straight in! The water...uhhh, it was more like actually horrid sludge though, so it kinda like. Uh. When it jumped in it straight up got stuck in it like thick mud, so because of the speed it was going when it stopped like that, I got launched right off of its back! The good news with that though, is that I flew right over the gross stinky water and landed on the shore, so I didn't have to even touch the oogie stuff.

Oh, and the staff hit the water and sunk while the horse was like flailing around and stuff which totally worked! The fountain exploded, just like how it's supposed to! I think!

AND THANKFULLY FOR ME, AND MY JUSTIFIABLE HORROR AT THE TURN OF EVENTS, RITTS WAS FINE. AFTER THE FLASH OF LIGHT, THE WATER WAS CLEAR AGAIN, RITTS WAS SAFE JUST OUTSIDE THE FOUNTAIN WATER, AND THE UH...THE HORSE WAS ALSO JUST FINE I GUESS. IT JUST LIKE. STOOD UP, DRANK SOME OF THE WATER, AND WALKED AWAY BACK TO ITS RIDER, WHO LIKE, SOMEHOW PUT THEIR HEAD BACK ON. YEAH, OKAY, WHATEVER, SURE.

OH, AND NONE OF THEM WERE GOOP ZOMBIES ANYMORE. JUST NORMAL SKELETON GUYS, WHICH WAS COOL. AND THEY STOPPED BEING MEAN AND SCARY, WHICH WAS ALSO COOL.

SO, THEN I GOT THE STAFF BACK FROM THE CLEAN WATER, PICKED RITTS UP LIKE A FOOTBALL, AND LEFT. PICKED UP A FEW SOUVENIRS ON THE WAY TOO, ALSO, AS WELL.

THE SLOG CONTINUES. GOODBYE, ANCIENT COWBOY ISLAND.

—

Ritts huffed loudly and dramatically very close to Phangg's ears, draped over his shoulders. He had been watching his older brother finish writing the entry, his arms slung limply and loosely over Phangg's chest.

At least he had the decency to whisper his accusation instead of blowing up his eardrums by talking too loudly right in his face. "Phangg, you *stole* that cowboy hat from the guy you decapitated."

Hrrngn, is it an accusation if it's right? "Only technically!" Phangg tilted his head to give Ritts a look and held up one of his hands. Sticking one finger up, he moved to defend himself, "but I also one: apologized, and two: I told them it was an equal trade." He flopped his hand back down onto the book in his lap and shrugged. It nearly knocked Ritts off.

"What's an accidental decapitation but a fair trade for a cool hat? Besides, they didn't seem to mind." He shrugged again, "I think they were just happy with their clean fountain, so win-win. Commerce, if you will, etcetera."

Humming in response, Ritts slipped off his shoulder and slumped onto the ground, looking up at the large wide leaves the trees around here had and the other sky islands that were close to this one. "Can we give the hat to uncle as a gift? To like, say sorry for everything?"

"UHHHHHHHHH," he thought aloud, annoyingly loud and dramatic on purpose. "Yeah, y'know what, sure we can give it to him. It's got like, eugh, cowboy residue in it still, which is gross, but like I said- equal trade." Phangg grumbled, eying the cowboy hat in question. "Eh, on the bright side, uncle gets *two* souvenirs in it for the price of free! Hat. The residue. I'm sure he'll love it. I hope you know that this is both sarcasm and my genuine feelings."

“Um, he probably won’t like the residue. What does that even mean?”

Phangg straightened up, “OI, NO MORE QUESTIONS. YOU SHOULD START DRAWING THE MURDER-HORSE!”

His brother didn’t even flinch nor sit up as he crossed his arms, “you could ask nicely you know...”

“Sorry.” It was a little mean and demanding, but Ritts did that to him all the time. Plus he *knows* he’s just playing around. “Lemme start over. Oi! Can you, pretty please, my dear brother, start drawing the murder-horse? I am quite excited to see it, slash genuine. P.S. I love you.”

Ritts shot up at that, lunging for the book and the pencil and chuckling evilly, “thank you. Because I love you too, I will. Now get your mitts off the journal!”

So he did and watched Ritts draw the Horrors over his shoulder.

ISLAND UM:Uh. -

- (THE ONE WITH THE STINKY GOOP MONSTER, OKAY. THAT ISLAND)

*We both came to the ~~decision~~ decision to go to the last island instead of island number 3. The one with the big creature very much didn’t want us in its home. It threw us both into a wall last time! Well, I smacked the wall, Phangg got to eat the ground and **then** smacked into the wall. Fun ride, but I don’t think I wanna do that again. 2/10, scared the socks off of me. I think Phangg nearly wet himself.*

//WOAH, WOAHH, WOAHH. FIRST OFF, SHUT UP, NO I DIDN'T. AND SECOND IT WASN'T A MUTUAL DECISION TO GO TO WEIRD CREEPY MONSTER ISLAND NEXT. THERE WAS NO DISCUSSION, YOU JUST DECIDED ON IT??? AND I LET YOU?

// die a thousand deaths <3.

//YEAH, YEAH, WHATEVER.

*The goop monster thing really isn't **that** scary in my opinion. Maybe just spooky.*

I mean, sure, it's big! And literally threw weird goopy stuff at us before, but I think it was just upset! At us, probably. Or maybe because the water in the broken down spring it was guarding was, honestly? Horrid and disgusting. Which, after Waterbed People Island, and Ancient Cowboy Island, yeah. I can see why I guess.

*But, okay, I admit, the creepy monster island **was** a bit scary, but I'm not scared of it **anymore**. Phangg might be though, he hasn't talked much and he's tense.*

It sucks, and I feel bad for the monster, but I think I feel worse thinking about how this gross water is flowing down to the surface. All the sky islands do that, obviously, but this water was straight nasty. I don't think I like the idea of it mixing around in the surface lakes! And it's all our fault, really. Or at least it got worse because of us.

I don't think Phangg really gets it yet, though. He brushed it off.

*//WOW, THANKS, RITTS. I'M NOT **THAT** STUPID YOU KNOW. JEEZY HECKIN CEAZY, MAN.*

—

Ritts pushed the book down, partially closing the cover but holding his thumb to keep their page. He leaned forward towards his brother, "Hey, Phangg? Uhhh, do you...want me to stop here? We can just move on or something."

"No, no, no. No, Ritts, I don't care. You can just- nah, just keep going." Phangg was staring down at the rock he was kicking, but he made sure to chuckle after he spoke. Ritts was sensitive like that, if he thought Phangg was really bothered, which to be fair he *was* absolutely bothered right now, then the little guy would worry his head off and, eugh, Phangg didn't want *that* either.

They were still on the edge of Evil Monster Island, though it hardly looked as monstrous now that the spring was fixed. They were just standing near the warp bridge that would lead them to the next island, while Ritts was writing out the journal entry.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Ritts was looking at him, Phangg could just tell, even though he was still staring at his boots.

“Yeah, course, bud. Don’t worry about it,” Phangg crossed his arms and looked up. The grin spread across his face felt wrong and more forced than normal, but hopefully, Ritts wouldn’t notice. He *usually* never did.

Based on the way that Ritts shrugged and leaned into his side, he was probably safe. “If you say so...but, you seem a lot more hung up on stuff than normal. I just wanna make sure I’m not, uhhh, pushing? Pa always says I’m too nosey and pushy for my own good, y’know? I mean, you say that *too*, but you’re a big stinker about it!”

Ritts was starting to grate on Phangg’s remaining nerves. Please, for once, just stop talking??? Phangg thought he was gonna drop it! This didn’t sound like it was dropped!!

But Ritts continued, “so, I’m just saying, I think-”

Phangg lost his cool, a little bit, admittedly. He pulled away from his younger brother’s side and shifted away. “Jeepers creepers, Ritts!! I told you to drop it!! Just finish up your stupid entry already, that’s what will make me feel better!”

It wasn’t until he saw the look on Ritts’s face fall further that he realized what he’d said. Aw, jeez, he didn’t mean to snap for real. And yet, when he opened his mouth to apologize, no words came out. He just couldn’t force them past his throat, and with an ugly feeling, he found he didn’t even want to apologize right now.

He was too...angry. Way more than he should be. At what, he didn’t know.

Except, maybe he *did* know what he was really mad at. Himself.

Figures. This whole thing was *his* fault because he just couldn’t take things seriously when it mattered. He never could, and he didn’t know if he ever *would*.

He couldn’t even take this argument or the apology he wanted to give seriously. Or this whole mission (the sequel [™]) even, and yet, to his horror, Ritts *was*. The kid, as silly as he was, seemed to understand things Phangg never could. Or at least, he understood how to stand up and be serious when he felt like it. And like, Phangg was dumb, okay, but he wasn’t entirely stupid. He knew when he was *supposed* to be serious most of the time... he just couldn’t act on it very well. That’s the biggest difference between him and his little brother.

He hated it.

And see, now he wanted to apologize *more* for snapping. But, stupidly and contradictorily, he also wanted to apologize even *less*. EUGH, feelings were so *dumb*.

Ritts sat down right where he had been standing and didn't say anything. Nor did he open back up the stupid adventure journal, the closed cover of it was set down beside his leg.

And then he just sat there, still not saying anything. Fine, then, Phangg didn't want to talk anyway, that's essentially what he'd asked for, right?

A couple of minutes go by, and still nothing. Phangg peeked over his shoulder again, his brother was drawing in the dirt with a short stick, approachable and still not closed off. UGH, how does he do that?

Phangg gave it a few more minutes until that feeling at the back of his throat was metaphorically swallowed into his chest and woven around his ribs. Weirdly enough, he found himself softly plopping himself down beside Ritts almost as if on auto-pilot soon anyway.

He let out a manual heavy sigh and picked up a similarly short stick to start poking the dirt as well. He wasn't drawing though, just kinda pushing dirt back and forth as if digging a small moat.

It was Ritts who broke the silence at some point with something that wasn't just breathy sighs. "Y'know, I was thinking- scary, right, but anyway, -I was thinking. About Salt's bakery back on the surface, I kinda wanna give her a recipe idea that's like, SO outrageous that she's *got* to actually try making it, y'know?"

Phangg sighed. Ritts was talking about bread, of all things. But, his chest was relieved of a bit of energy anyway at the thought of Salt's bakery, and the sheer amount of time the two brothers spend there back home. Just thinking about it made him crave a fresh sweet bun, and it made him miss hanging around the aromatic bakery and the surface lake down a forested trail out back. And his friends, who at this point he hadn't seen in weeks.

The same friends who had probably already wrapped up their own sky island trips they'd been sent on too...getting it right the first time, already home with a sense of accomplishment. And most likely a sense of disappointment in their friend, poor pitiable unreliable Phangg, for coming back a coward and getting sent back like an idiot too.

Before his thoughts could fall further, Ritts continued. Chipper, either aware of Phangg's spiral, or completely oblivious to it. He couldn't tell.

"But I just can't decide what's more crazy..."

Despite the self-oriented resentment and the melancholic homesickness for his friends and his life back on the surface battling for the spotlight, he felt...oh, he didn't know. Humbled?

It was a lot, you know? With the purpose of their journey and his inability to do it properly, uncle's trust and belief he's definitely shattered by now, and even the fun he's been able to have with just him and his little brother...it was a lot.

Maybe too much.

But with the suddenness of what Ritts said, it felt like Phangg could actually take a step back. He'd been too focused on this awful sticky feeling, he hadn't even remembered Salt or her bakery. Or even his friends. The good parts, at least.

"...apple and chocolate dessert bread which sounds so good or something disgusting like carrot and yogurt milk bread. What do you think, Phangg?"

Okay, he couldn't help a snort at that, regardless of him covering it up or not, and tilted his head back. "I...think that," pausing a moment to gather his words, he dropped the stick and rested his hands on his knee, "maybe they need to be a bit more outrageous to make someone like *Salt* both cringe and activate Spiteful Bread-Baking Mode(©)."

Ritts nodded sagely, "mm-hmm, mm-hmm! You're right, I'm being *way* too tame here, I gotta get sillier. But it's okay, we can just workshop it later!"

His little brother finished another dirt doodle and pulled the stick toward his stomach where he fiddled with it with both hands. He rolled it around his palms several times before clearing his throat, "Phangg, can I ask you something? You don't have to answer it, but I want to ask anyway." He took the silence as the invitation it was, "are you...I know you're upset about the whole second trip, and I know you're pretending sometimes that you're having a good time so I don't worry. At least that's what I've been thinking."

Oh. Had he been doing that? Not all the time, but...he definitely *had* been doing that.

His heart beat a bit faster, he had a suspicion he knew where Ritts was going with this.

“I’ve been having a really good time anyway, but you don’t have to pretend for me, y’know? Or, um, are you mad at me? Maybe you just don’t wanna hurt my feelings, or you’re afraid I’ll get upset, right? So you didn’t tell me, and it’s fine but I just wanna know and then I’ll be okay. But, um, I don’t think *you’re* okay, and that maybe makes me more sad than thinking you’re mad at me.”

The feeling, the sticky *hot* feeling, reached out its roots and yanked Phangg back into its stronghold in his chest. “What? No, Ritt’s I’m not upset with you at all, why would you think that?”

“I mean, I didn’t do what we were supposed to either. And I knew-”

“Th-that’s stupid! That’s not supposed to be on you, alright? I told you *not to worry about it*.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m older, Ritts! Uncle trusted *me* to do our job and to keep *you* safe, but I didn’t do *either of those things*!” He didn’t mean to snap, but the doors were open now.

“Even now, this time, I’m *still* not doing anything! *Again*. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that any time we’ve done something *right*, it’s because *you* stepped up, or it was an *accident* for crying out loud! You shouldn’t have to, and- and, I know you like being in charge of the journal and that you- you want to share it with me, but I really hate that thing sometimes!” Phangg was breathing heavily and maybe a bit quicker than normal, but it didn’t matter. He couldn’t stop the words now, maybe he didn’t want to.

It wasn’t fair of him to put this on Ritts right now, but it also wasn’t fair for Uncle to put this on them in the first place, and it wasn’t fair that Phangg couldn’t handle it and *everyone else could*, and- it just wasn’t fair!

Distantly, he felt water dripping down his cheek and occasionally splashing onto his curled fists. “I wanted to make this, this whole mess, *better* somehow. Help you with the journal for real this time, I dunno, support you! Let you still have fun. But I keep messing *that* up too! I can’t step up- like, why do people expect things from me when I never give a reason to? Why do *you* think I can-”

Was it raining? Maybe...it was hard to tell. There was still smoke in the air from the fire pits of Evil Monster Island, or maybe it had coated his lungs too and got caught in the sticky trap of Phangg’s ribs. Either way, it didn’t matter.

“I, I keep *letting* you get hurt, too! Ritts, I was terrified when that zombie horse flung you around. I keep putting you in bad situations because I just can’t- I can’t manage my shit. Like when I wrestled with you at the Waterbed Spring, I thought when the light flashed that you were in danger because *I* put you there. Everything, the, the islands we came back to, all of them! They’re worse than they were before because *I, I don’t take things seriously*. And I drag people into it with me.”

“And the journal- the journal! If it were up to *me*, I would’ve gone by myself and let you stay with uncle where you could’ve written that thing with him in peace, but he didn’t *let* me go alone. And *now we both* have to document everywhere *I* messed up so I can relive it MORE THAN ONCE. And once again I have to watch myself get you in trouble. It’s not fair! And I’m being so stupid- and- EUGH!”

The words ran out, feeling much like the words of that introduction he had tried to write. Maybe it *was* the same...just louder or something.

Suddenly, or maybe not so suddenly at all, Phangg registered Ritts hugging him tightly from the side, holding both of his palms up flat towards the sky with his own. He was breathing obnoxiously loud, patterned, and coaxingly as if Phangg was supposed to do it too. He latched onto that and tried to breathe along, which is when he noticed he’d been maybe hyperventilating a little bit.

Oh.

His eyes were crusty and his face was itchy too. He hadn’t meant for that to happen. Yikes...

Together they coaxed his breathing back to normal- deep and stabilizing again. He wanted to say something, but the heavy feeling angrily bubbled down into his stomach again until...okay, yeah, there goes his lunch. But it did kind of help.

Now seated away from the mess with limbs that felt a bit like jelly, and a sorely empty stomach, he sat with Ritts rubbing his back until he didn’t feel so heavy, or far too light anymore.

Finally, his mouth filled with cool soothing words instead of dry after-images of things he hadn’t meant to say. “Hey, uh...” His throat was a bit coarse. “Thank you for, y’know, calming me down. And I’m so, so sorry you had to see that, and that I made you feel like I was mad at you. But uh, mostly I’m sorry for acting like I have been. It wasn’t very, uh, epic of me.”

“Hmmm...CaDMAi then.”

“Wh-” he spluttered, “are you. Really??? I mean that’s *fair*, I guess, but.”

“Wait, wait! Hold on, I don’t like, I didn’t mean that *actually*! I meant I’m not taking any sorries for that whole last part! Like, get nullified, or something! Die unepically. Guh...”

“Nullified- unepically. Wuh-huh?” No, seriously, what?

“No, no, I mean-” Ritts tried, but decided to start over. Thankfully. “Okay, yeah I didn’t like that you had a panic attack or the things you just said, but that’s like, I’m sorry you *had* one in the first place or that those things’ve been bugging you. ‘Cause also, um I didn’t even think about any of it like that.

“I guess there’s a lot more going on for you, like, really overwhelming stuff, and it’s hard to hold it together for a long time. Like, s’a lot harder than it should be, so *I’m* not upset at you that it broke and stuff. I would have blowed up and s’ploded, like, *forever* ago, ‘cause getting all overwhelmed feels super stinky, and it sucks a lot. Um, so, I think *I’m* unepic too ‘cause I was probably making it worse and didn’t help.”

That’s, wow, yeah, that’s certainly a different way to think about it. Phangg rubbed at his arm and glanced at the journal they’d moved with them away from Phangg’s mess.

“Maybe you *did* help, actually. In a-”

“HAHA, YOU ADMIT IT! YOU *HAVE* BEEN HAVING FUN!” Ritts loudly exclaimed, as he sat up straight and punched fist bumps into the sky. “TAKE THAT, INNER RITTS.”

The surprised laugh that burst through his chest took the rest of the slimy feeling away, much like the goop from the fountains clearing away with a quick burst of light. They laughed for a bit, and yeah, okay, Phangg still felt like ass (not just emotionally, but physically now too, yippee) but the grin on Ritt’s face and the alleviation from his chest might just have been worth it.

“Oh, I didn’t mean what I said about hating the journal, by the way. I don’t...*hate* it, and- and I *do* really like filling it out with you. I just have a complicated relationship with it, really on the rocks, y’know? It took my excitement with it in the divorce. *Lame*.” Phangg joked.

“Well, good, ‘cause I was thinking that like maybe *you* should write this journal entry. I’ll give you all of the crayons that I hide in my pocket?” He’d picked back up the journal, but Phangg hadn’t seen when, and waggled it in front of him.

“Uh. I...” He hesitated, tapping his fingers against his thigh in quick succession. And then, he let out a breath, fingers still tapping, but calmer. “Man, y’know what, Ritts? You *were* right earlier, I *am* a sucker for that hopeful angst with a happy ending crap...and *I* was thinking- equally as scary -that maybe my writing skills can be used *later*, or something. It wouldn’t stand a chance to yours, so I think this entry’s got your name all over it.”

Ritts took a moment to think it over before he nodded sagely. He took the closed book and beamed down at it. Slumping against Phangg’s shoulder, he flipped through the pages to the page they had left off at. After a moment of scrutinizing it, Ritts scribbled a large ‘X’ over the parts already written, and flipped to the next blank page. “I still want help, though,” he said, holding out one of those aforementioned hidden secret pocket crayons. It was green. And pocket temperature.

Oh, jeez, now Phangg found himself appreciating Ritt’s childish maturity instead of resenting it. Why did he ever think it was a bad thing? He may be younger, sure, but it was okay for him to be at a different spot than Phangg, just like it was okay to have different interests and skill sets. And it was okay to get overwhelmed sometimes, and yeah, he shouldn’t have snapped, but he wasn’t a bad person for it. Which sounds weird...but hey, that’s Emotional Maturity for you. And being a good brother.

Maybe someday he’d get it for real.

“Bleh, if I have to.”

—

EVIL ISLAND- ATTEMPT TWO OF THE RE-DO

Just like last time, this island sucked. Seriously! I mean, who really wants to live on an island that's full of holes and caves and also a lot of fires? There was fire everywhere both times, but anyway, I rate it negative gajillion points.

//HEH, A NEGATIVE GAJILLION POINTS OUT OF HOW MANY?

// out of 10!

//YEAH...REALLY BAD GROSS ISLAND. WOULDN'T RECOMMEND.

There's these weird giant caves everywhere and you really gotta watch your step or you'll fall right into one, and if you ask me it sounds like a pretty annoying thing to have to deal with if you stay on this island for a while.

*There were some **good** parts of the island, once we s'ploded the fountain. When the fountain stopped being disgusting, it ended up being, like. **super huge**, and detailed. Kinda like it came straight from that cool old-looking town island full of ruins and animal people. In the center of the fountain, there was even a space that looked carved with the staff thingy in mind, it fit perfectly and was like a little centerpiece thing. I dunno, I removed it pretty fast because the island sucks, and like, what if it swallowed the staff and didn't give it back?*

//I MEAN...I GUESS IT WAS KIND OF COOL. BUT, NO, I WOULDN'T PUT IT PAST THIS EVIL PLACE TO JUST EAT THE THING.

Hmm, well, anyway enough about the fountain, I thought it was cooler that there was like, a full jungle around us suddenly. Just sprouted out of the ground after the fountain was fixed, but, again, it was still on fire. I don't know how that works.

//TREES SHOULDN'T BE ON FIRE AS THEIR NATURAL STATE. AGAIN, THIS ISLAND DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. THE ONLY THING IT MAKES IS...GHH, DISDAIN AND CONFUSION.

*Wildlife came with it too, some of them were...also on fire. I also don't know how that works. And...I don't really wanna dwell on the monster much, but it looked better too. It wasn't full of goop, but it also **wasn't** on fire. Thank heck for that. It seemed like some plant and stone giant, but when it looked at us we ran back to the warp pad.*

//WELL, I DIDN'T SEE IT PERSONALLY. MAYBE YOU COULD DRAW IT LATER...? LATER, THOUGH.

//oh! yeah, I can try! I didn't get a super good look at it, so you're just gonna have to deal with it having my own creative liberty as you say.

//MAKE IT UGLIER THAN NORMAL. YOU GOTTA.

//shouldn't be hard, hehe.

*Anyway, it's better that this island is actually clean now, and even though it's not a very good island in my opinion, I think **I** feel better anyway too.*

//I think we gotta have a talk with uncle though, and maybe that'll make everyone feel better after, y'know?

//I'M NOT SO SURE ABOUT THAT ONE. BUT, I MEAN, I'M GLAD WE TALKED FOR REAL. SO, BECAUSE YOU KNOW FEELINGS BETTER THAN ME, I GUESS, I'LL TRUST YOUR JUDGEMENT. JUST THIS TIME, THOUGH, DON'T GET COMFORTABLE.

//hehehehehe the power I hold right now.

A MUCH-NEEDED TALK - BACK HOME AT THE END OF THE WEEK

“Uncle!” Ritts called this time as the two stepped into their home back down on the surface. A bright and sunny midday welcomed them, just like the last time they came home to Uncle.

Their uncle was sitting at the kitchen table, with several papers and a mug of coffee in front of him. He looked up quickly at their entrance, smiling wide. A very similar welcoming to the weather outside, really. “Boys!”

Phangg shrugged, tone flat, “yes, hi, hello, we are here.” Which only made Uncle’s smile lower.

Wow, Phangg was already doing a great job at trying to make Uncle not worry (sarcasm). Because Ritts told him that with Phangg feeling so gross about all this, Pa was probably also not feeling so great about it. In a different way, though. So, while Phangg had said it was stupid for their *uncle* of all people to feel yucky about sending the two of them back up to the sky islands, Ritts had brought up a good point.

Uncle was definitely *worried*. Worried about a lot of things, probably. About the well-being of his nephews, about if they actually did their job this time, and probably also about if Phangg hated him or not.

Which wasn’t true. Phangg *didn’t* hate their uncle. He was just upset and...well it was a complicated mess of emotions.

And, when Phangg had said *that* to Ritts, the kid turned right around on him again and said that Pa was also probably feeling his *own* mess of emotions.

That shut him up, but it didn't really help, because *Phangg* was still upset and he wanted his uncle to know that. Never mind the fact that *Uncle* was probably upset too, but he's going to continue ignoring that one, thanks. Sorry, Ritts, he wasn't quite on the level of emotional maturity to get over himself just like that, and he didn't really understand why he would have to so he let it go at that.

Not before *agreeing* to have a lengthy and real conversation when they got home, though. Regardless of how *real long* Uncle liked to talk at them about stuff Phangg tuned out normally.

Okay, yeah, yeah, that wasn't the same thing.

Whatever.

Back in the moment, he realized Ritts had picked up where his greeting had died.

"Hey, Pa! Miss us?" Ritts asked cheerily, smiling as he turned around to close the door behind them.

"Of course I did, Ritts! I'm glad the two of you made it home safe, I've missed you *both* very much," Uncle made a pointed warm smile in Phangg's direction, but Phangg's gaze traveled to the other end of the living room in response, where his DS was lying shut on the couch near the corner with the beanbags.

He tried really hard to bite back the retort that if Pa really didn't want them to be gone from home that long then he shouldn't have sent them away again. He knew Uncle already knew that. Besides, he had kinda missed him too.

"I take it everything went swimmingly on the islands? Everything go okay?"

Phangg's head snapped up before Ritts could properly respond. Within seconds, Phangg was pushing the adventure journal he had been carrying into Uncle's hands. He kept the staff though, and leaned part of his weight on it.

Their uncle looked down at it for a few moments before he smiled and rested the closed book on the kitchen table beside him.

He didn't even open it.

Phangg glared down at the book on the table, confused. When he lifted his gaze he noticed that both his brother and his uncle were looking at him. Now he was more confused.

“What?”

Ritts turned away and took the adventure bag that was slung across his shoulder and walked further into the living room. He plopped it onto the carpet and sat on the floor beside it, leaning back on the edge of the couch, minding his own business. Phangg saw him eyeing his DS though...

Uncle sighed, getting his attention back, “Well, I’ve put some thought into it, Phangg, and I wanted to talk with you.”

“Oh, *boy*, another monologue.”

“No, no, not like that,” Pa chuckled softly, then quickly sobered. “I mean I want to talk *with* you.”

“Oh.” He agreed to a conversation, sure, but Phangg didn’t expect it to be immediately when they stepped into the living room.

“I wasn’t sure which day you two would be returning home, but I’ve been planning on getting together a feast of sorts. I’ve already reached out to the families of both yours and Ritts’s friends, *and* Miss Salt’s chipping in a whole lot- she’s really proud of you guys. I am too, I-”

Oh?

That’s not what he had been expecting. And not in a particularly *good* way. This wasn’t a conversation, it was *another thing sprung on him*.

“Wait-wait-wait, hold on. Sorry, what do you *mean* proud? Why are we celebrating?” He didn’t want a celebration.

The warm smile his uncle gave him only irritated him, but he reigned it in to be civil. He was *not* going to lose his cool again if he could help it.

“I had some time to consider things, and I realized how big a task it was for you two,” okay, that sounded targeted, “and we’re proud that you guys were able to succeed- in half the time too!”

Hmm, yeah, that's because they wanted it over with, especially after Phangg's whole Moment^(TM).

"Um," Phangg started, expecting to have to try being extra cautious to keep calm. But it was easy. Probably because he was rather tired.

"Yeah, no, I don't think you should be proud of us. I don't *want* a celebration, but thanks."

A celebration meant *people*, and *people* meant more people *acknowledging* why there was a celebration. So, no.

"Look," he continued, deciding to just get it over with when Uncle looked ready to insist further. "I don't *want* to talk about this right now. Maybe later, definitely for sure, of course, but not right now. *That* being said, I do have a few things I *do* want to say, Pa. So, because I feel like ass-

"Language, mister-"

Phangg turned his head slightly to make eye contact with his uncle, "*because I feel like ass-*" then he turned back to look at the ground again. "I want to...*apologize*. But I want something in return, so we can just move on. Can I please get an apology from *you*? I feel like I'm not allowed to ask, but Ritts said I should, and I'm trying this new thing called 'listening to advice,' so...

"And, okay, I admit that, *yeah* maybe I didn't react right about the Thing, but at the same time I think that the amount of what I felt was reasonable. Uhh, that didn't make sense, ugh, like, I didn't handle it the best -wow sue me, we've already covered I'm bad at that -but I'm justified in feeling so upset at the situation you put me in. If that makes sense?

"So...I *am* sorry, Pa. But I'm hurt too." Phangg finished seriously. But then he second-guessed himself just a little. A lot, actually. Whispering off to Ritts who was pretending not to listen, "that's what I meant to say, right?"

Ritts *had* ended up taking Phangg's DS. He looked up from the game and gave him a quick thumbs up and a vigorous nod before going back to pretending he wasn't paying any attention at all. He was good at that if that's surprising.

“Phangg...thank you for speaking up, I know it can be hard. I am more than willing to speak with you later, and I can certainly postpone any form of celebration or what have you until you are ready. And, son, I *am* sorry. I realized once you’d left again how unfair it was that I pushed this all on you when I knew you were struggling. That’s on me.” Uncle paused, and smiled again, gesturing for Ritts to join them at the table.

Because Ritts was *definitely* still paying attention, he snapped the game system shut, threw it on the couch cushion behind him, and sprung up at the invitation. He immediately slammed into the seat next to Phangg.

“Now, is there anything you guys want to share with me from the trip that was fun? You don’t have to, but maybe it’ll be nice.”

“WE WROTE A LEGEND!” Ritts shouted. “We wanted to make up some cool reason why surface dwellers need to do the stupid ritual island trip thing so we’d feel better and more prepared, you know? I think it only like, kind of helped, or, well, maybe it didn’t at all, but I still wanted you to read it. :)”

Oh yeah, Phangg almost forgot about their made-up legend. It sounded true enough that it probably fell into that category of ‘Ignore Immediately,’ so, y’know.

“Sure, kiddo, lay it on me.”

One in-depth exaggerated explanation from Ritts later, and Phangg nearly falling asleep at the table, Uncle finally swallows a cough meant to clear his throat.

“Wow that’s...that’s remarkably accurate. ‘Creative Liberty’ aside, of course. Are you boys sure you didn’t listen?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Do- do you do this on purpose or...oh, forget it.”

Uncle looked about ready to release them to their own devices finally, but Phangg did have one more thing he’d been meaning to ask Uncle when they got home. He’d been thinking about it ever since that emotional conversation with Ritts back on stupid monster island.

“Hey, Pa...one more thing before I dissolve for an indeterminate amount of time.”

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow...I want to learn our history, like, actually, I think. But I want to do it my way. Like, I say things at you and you adjust it or something.” Without waiting to hear what Uncle was going to answer, Phangg took one glance at the forming smile and departed from the room, heading right for the stairs. He knew Pa would say yes anyway, and frankly, he was kind of wiped and just wanted to lie down.

Oh, and he snatched his discarded DS from the couch on his way, of course.

THE LEGEND PART 2

(PROOFREAD BY UNCLE. SO ITS MORE ACCURATE. WISH WE'D KNOWN THIS SOONER. BEGRUDGINLY.)

//We all learn at our own pace, kiddo, it's okay. I know I hadn't quite taken the time to find out what your pace was, but we'll get there. Smiley-face (:))

//UH, YEAH... OKAY, HOLD ON, DID YOU JUST SAY 'SMILEY FACE' INSTEAD OF JUST SMILING AT ME? UNIRONICALLY??

//Did I?

//I CHANGE MY MIND, I DON'T WANT TO LEARN HISTORY ANYMORE.

//Phangg.

*//UGH, **OKAY**, OKAY.*

LISTEN UP LOSERS AND WEEPERS, HERE'S THE ABRIDGED VERSION OF SPIRIT FOUNTAIN HISTORY THAT ACTUALLY MAKES SENSE. TO ME. THIS IS THE ONLY WAY TO EXPLAIN IT WITHOUT GETTING LOST AND OFF TRACK OR DISTRACTED. BEING DIRECT. WITH VALIDATION. APPARENTLY.

ANYWHOOZERS, THERE ARE ~~HUNDREDS~~ OR THOUSANDS OF ISLANDS THAT FLOAT IN THE SKY. THE SURFACE USED TO BE A SKY ISLAND TOO, THE BIGGEST AND MOST CENTRAL ONE THERE WAS, UNTIL IT FELL DOWN INTO SOME GOOP.

//The goop, as you call it, is more akin to demons, actually.

//I'M GOING TO IGNORE THAT.

THE ISLANDS THAT WERE STILL IN THE SKY RAINED WATERFALLS DOWN INTO THE CRACKS ON THE SURFACE THAT WAS BUBBLING GOOP EVERYWHERE THAT CORRUPTED THINGS IT CAME INTO CONTACT WITH. THE WATERFALLS REALLY DID FORM ALL OF THE SURFACE LAKES, ACTUALLY! AND SOME OF THEM ARE SO INTRICATE ITS KINDA WEIRD TO HEAR THAT THEY WERE FORMED LIKE THAT BECAUSE OF THE ATTEMPT TO STOP CREEPY ANCIENT GOOP FROM BURSTING OUT OF THE GROUND AND LAYING WASTE EVERYWHERE.

BUT, BECAUSE IT COULDN'T BE THAT EASY, LIKE IT NEVER CAN BE I SWEAR, THE GOOP SOMEHOW USED THE WATERFALLS TO TRAVEL UP TO THE SHORES OF THE OTHER ISLANDS. IT STARTED CORRUPTING ALL OF THE WATER FROM ITS SOURCE.

THE SURFACE PEOPLE ALSO TRAVELED UP TO THE SKY AFTER THE BEASTS AND MADE A TRADE WITH THE ISLAND PEOPLES. IF THE ISLANDS WOULD CONTINUE TO OFFER THEIR WATER TO THE SURFACE, THE SURFACE DWELLERS COULD PUT THEIR MAGIC TOWARDS KEEPING THE WATER SAFE AND PURE OR WHATEVER IT IS THESE STUPID SURFACE ROCKS ACTUALLY DO.

//ARE YOU NOT GOING TO CORRECT ME?

//It's simple, kiddo. The thing is, about magic, is that it's magic. How can one be sure of the intricacies and logistics that allow old magic artifacts and rituals to function properly?

*//IT'S OKAY, IF YOU ADMIT YOU DON'T KNOW HOW IT WORKS, PA, I REALLY DON'T CARE. BUT, IF **YOU** DON'T KNOW, THEN WHO DOES? NOBODY?*

//It's old magic, son, it works in mysterious ways lost to us today. But, you have the gist! That is good enough for this purpose. Go on.

IT WARDS THE GOO AWAY BUT NEEDS TO BE REPURIFIED EVERY COUPLE OF YEARS OR SO. OR ELSE THE GOO COMES BACK AND I ASSUME THE CYCLE OF THE HORRORS OR WHATEVER BEGINS AGAIN. UNFORTUNATELY, I HAD IT PROVEN TO ME WHEN THE GOOP MONSTERS FORMED ON A FEW ISLANDS ME AND MY BROTHER WERE FORCED TO GO AND PURIFY AND CAME AFTER US WHILE DESTROYING THE ISLAND.

ANYWAY, THAT'S THE BASICS OUT OF THE WAY, BUT THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME RIGHT NOW.

THE NEXT THING ON THIS CRAPPY HISTORY REPORT IS ABOUT THE SURFACE AND SKY ISLANDS THEMSELVES. YIPPEE.

//I'M GOOD FOR NOW, I'M GOING TO SALT'S TO SEE MY FRIENDS.

//Have fun, kiddo.