

QUINT'S JOURNEY: *fate looms*

Quint hadn't traveled this far outside the barrows in quite some time. He could still remember his brothers daring him to creep into the Outer Rim; they always singled him out being the runt of all the cubs. Now Quint had his own family to feed.

He had been eyeing a speckled trout in the whirling springs; a fish large enough to feed his children for a week. They were tired of the rancid garbage he would bring back from township, but living life as a raccoon there aren't many options for victuals. Quint could work hard and possibly return home with no prize, or just dig through and bring home the butcher's scraps.

The intense sun beat down on the creek bank and seared the mud into a tough dirt shell. Where the stream edge did retain dampness, a brilliant grim moss grew and penetrated the folds of the rock. With all the beauty around him, Quint stayed focused. The sounds of the Outer Rim were numbed by the brook song that packed his ears.

The bold bandit, attempting to keep the element of surprise, stalked the aquatic prey while trying not to eclipse the sunlight. The blinding sun was a method he had learned when he was young. He stayed focused... too focused to notice he was bit by bit approaching a very large water fall. The rocks that poked through the top of the stream were covered with slick black luminous algae. If he had taken the time to notice, Quint would have seen the algae seemed to make the sunlight dance in waves.

Wildlife and flight birds orchestrated the score of what was to happen. Quint had always had a problem with listening. He never listened to his mother when she tried to teach him ways to forage and build shelter. He never listened to his father when he said to stay clear of the Outer Rim and what lay beyond, and now Quint wasn't listening to the warning of the toads and cicadas as he moved closer to the stream edge.

That's when it happened; focus turned to terror as Quint lost his hold on the riverbed. He tumbled head first into the stream, and a burst of water shot into his sinuses when his nose was taken off guard. Sunlight, rock, and plant colors mixed in a blurry topsy-turvy world, as Quint tried to right himself in the spinning current. Finally he grabbed a piece of driftwood that stretched out from the bank. He was out of breath, he held on tight, and rested.

Once Quint caught his breath and opened his eyes he took notice of the luminous algae that happened to be three inches from his snout. He looked into the slime, then past it, it was then he began to see images of his childhood. His brothers taunted him to swat at the bee hive. This image morphed with a bellow of smoke into when he met his wife; another bellow of smoke and it was his children being brought into the world. It was then when Quint heard the voice in his head, "Let go, Quint.... Let go and all will be well," and that's exactly what he did.

Once he began the fall from the cliff he awoke into panic and fright. The waterfall was far enough down for Quint to have a two quick thoughts, he was sure he was going to die on the rocks below. Then he thought about his family that he would never see again.

As he hit bottom, Quint felt that the gods had smiled on him today; he did not die on the rocks that were only inches away. The wind had been knocked out of him, but he thought it was a small price to pay for such a long trip. He struggled to regain composure and pull himself onto the soft muddy bank.

Once he had a solid footing, he looked back on the plummet he just experienced. A seismic shake began at his tail and flowed to his shaking head, drying his coat and dislodging the excess water from his ears. At that point Quint wasn't sure if his ears had been damaged in the fall. On this lower level there didn't seem to be any sounds, not even a muffled sound of damaged ears. No sounds of birds, no insects, and the waterfall twenty feet away didn't even make the slightest noise.

He remembered the hypnotizing algae... and then, Quint sat confused; he was sure he was pushed. He didn't realize it at first, but he was sure now. Someone or something pushed him into the creek.

He stepped back to look upon the lower territory, a place he was never to travel, and a place only to be story. **SNAP-** a dry twig broke under foot. His ears worked fine, but what was blocking the other worldly sounds?

He noticed the cliff aside the waterfall; there seemed to be plenty of places for hand and foot holds. He would have to cross the small river to get to the cliff face.

A large dam of sticks and leaves spanned the river only a few feet down. It looked like a beaver dam, only larger. He stood at one side of the bridge judging the distance. Quint placed his front paws way out and hunched up on his back legs to stretch his back. He stepped onto the wooden structure and balanced himself; it was then when he saw the magical black algae again. "Stay with us, Quint," he heard inside his head. Terrified by what happened the last time he was seduced by the black gunk thing, he ran across the dam to get to the other bank.

Quint was out of breath again, unsure if he had the strength to climb the cliff.

It was then when darkness rolled over Quint as if the sun had taken refuge behind a cloud. He raised his view upward and noticed a large oak tree had blocked the light. Wind blew through the leaves of the massive oak; still Quint was deaf to the sounds above him. That's odd, thought the wiry bandit.

Before Quint had a chance to realize that he might be in danger, he felt a sharp pain in his back as the great oak had pierced one of its immense roots through the raccoon's torso. He was impaled and pinned to the mud. Quint's face was pushed into the soil and he could smell the earth clay mix with the iron from his blood. He could finally hear; he could hear the tree twisting the root deep inside his cavity. His bones snapped under the weight of the plant. One of his ribs cracked and punctured his right lung; he was drowning away from the water. His spine was broken and his back legs kicked involuntary as his nerves fired with no response from his brain. The root twitched again and broke his spine in three more locations, his legs stopped. A nest of purple flowers stared Quint in the face. He knew it would be the last sight he would ever see, or so he thought. The buds opened in the blink of an eye and released a

murder of spores into the air. Quint only had one working lung left, but it was enough to inhale the spores. His body went numb and he heard the voice once again, "Soon Quint, you will be with us."

The tree grabbed his underbelly and lifted him into the air. The tree turned Quint around so that he may see his aggressor dead on. The great old oak pulled the little procyon closer. A knot hole bigger than Quint began to sink into the trunk of the tree to reveal needle sharp teeth.

Quint knew what was to happen, and he accepted it. He was sure that the purple spores helped sway his mind.

His body slid from the root into the mouth of the tree like a well prepared shish kabob. The bones that weren't snapped by the root were crushed in the belly of the tree into a fine powder.

A few minutes passed and Quint's bone powder was released though the leaves of the oak, it floated down and the baby purple flowers had their feed of fertilizer. The oak settled back into place, and waited for the next adventurer. If a tree laughs in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?