

The desert springs to life as the sand tastes the sun's golden rays. Thick layers of redstone over the horizon bake under an enduring and tireless heat. Lush dunes of desolation stretch into the gaping maw of Sweat Valley. Waving lines sail and flicker out across dry air as every insect exhales a hot, sweaty breath towards the sky.

An old lizard claws at the base of a cactus, drinking deeply of its basin. For countless suns, it crawls through the fiery sand, desperately clinging to life. It holds on to its last sips for as long as it can, risking dry death.

The cactus drip draws short. Soon, the thirst will once again take over, and this creature will be forced to migrate once more. The promise of shelter easily collapses, for no place in this area can sustain it for very long.

In the center of the valley, a formation of rocks moans. A mouth curls deeply into the ground as tiny streams of water drip to the back of its throat, pouring through cracks. In this damp, dark cave, little pieces of life sustain itself.

Thrag, a strong man with a broad head, rests on leopard skins in quiet comfort. His little snores echo across the cavern, several critters scatter in the shadows. Small stones crunch under soft footsteps.

Crunch crunch. Crunch, crunch crunch.

His eyes are already open, heart thundering in tightened chest. No insect steps like that. Something bigger had to have made that sound. Thrag instinctively reaches for his club, in wait of being seen. Quietly, he crawls behind a large boulder for cover.

Complete silence. He breathes slowly, listening intently to the walls.

The crunching has stopped. Thrag crouches, heart beating like a drum. Beads of cold sweat roll down his rigid arms. Carefully, he peers over the edge of the rock. His grip tightens.

Torchlight pours over three figures, lurching slowly into the center of the cave.

"This looks like a great spot," one of them grunts.

"We can hole up here for many moons," another voice calls out.

"Hold on," a third murmurs.

The forms detach. One figure crouches, and runs his hands across the stone floor.

"Still warm."

The three shadows exchange looks, nod, and begin to spread out across the room.

Thrag holds his breath, a cold sweat streaming down his face. He dares not to make a sound.

“Look, boss, leopard skins!”

“Excellent,” the figure in the center claps his hands, “they’ll keep us warm for many moons.”

Thrag’s heart sinks. It had been a struggle to kill those leopards with his bare hands, and these makeshift blankets had kept him warm for countless seasons.

“Someone’s here,” the center man remarks.

Thrag can feel the fire coming closer now. He throws his hands over his head, and squints his eyes shut.

Suddenly, he feels hands upon him.

“Come here, you!” a voice shouts as Thrag is pulled to his feet.

“Well, well, well! What have we here?”

“This is my home,” Thrag sighs, “you goons don’t belong here.”

The three intruders howl with laughter.

“Goons,” one man laughs, “Do you know who we are?! We’re the Pterodactyl Boys.”

“I’ve never heard of you.”

The man in the center grabs Thrag by the throat and pins him against the wall.

“You’ll know our names well before the night is over,” he snarls, “They call me Sabertooth Joe, and I’ve eaten men twice your size. I could bite your head off of your neck right now, if I wanted to.”

“Why are you doing this,” Thrag pleads, “this is my home. I’m not hurting anyone out here!”

“You’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time, boy. Our gang is hiding out from the law, and your shelter is just the perfect place for us.”

“Just let me go! I won’t tell anybody about you.”

Sabertooth Joe just shakes his head and laughs.

“I’m afraid that won’t do. You’ve seen our faces! We have no reason to trust you.”

“What should we do with him, boss?”

Joe licks his dry lips thoughtfully, his sharp yellow teeth curled into a menacing smile.

“Well, our meat rations run out in a few days...”

“You wouldn’t want to eat me,” Thrag counters, “I’m remarkably bitter.”

A lightning bolt cracks through Thrag’s skull, and in an instant, everything fades to black.