

The Challenge

Leaves crunch and boards creak to their limits, then the sounds reverberate around the wooden hallway. They escape through the busted gaps in the ceiling marked by lazy rays of sun. The trace heat inside the skeletal cabin should make it light jacket weather, long-sleeve shirt weather if you're a show-off. The instigator of the creaks and crunches, a small boy, is protected by a thick winter coat. This child is buried in fake fur and black fabric, his sloppy brown mop kept of hair kept hidden as he leaps from one pile of leaves to another, like he's avoiding a lethal fall. He can hear the light gasps of one of the observers of his ritual; outside the cabin, Marcy and Jarard play witness to the challenge of the Splintershank.

"Marcy, chill," a hissed whisper travels from a child in blue to another in purple. "You can't make any noise that the Splintershank could hear, or Arthur could get killed!"

Sniffing snot back up as quietly as she can, a girl wipes her face with a jacket sleeve, bobs her short brown hair, and clamps her mouth shut as tight as she can manage.

"He's doing fine, so don't worry." the dark-haired boy in a blue shirt pats Marcy's shoulder a few times, and takes care to make as little sound as possible with each gesture.

The gasps are followed by a few attempted whispers and some loud sniffs, but Arthur continues to stomp away, and lands with both feet to feel the bend in the rickety floor rather than just hear it. Any guy worth his salt can't just refuse the challenge of the Splintershank, least of all from a puke like Marcus—even if he is Marcy's brother. After he got through the challenge under dubious circumstances, with only one person to vouch for him, he had never stopped bragging about his alleged success. Arthur could not chicken-out, especially with his current audience. At the end of the hallway, Arthur releases the breath he forgot he was holding, and

leans against the single chair in the final room of the challenge, the kitchen. Accumulated sweat jumps from his face through the dim gaps in the floor, often caught by orange leaves, and sometimes even hits the sparse wood underfoot.

“Psssh, the rest is easy!” Jarard pats Marcy’s back gingerly in an obnoxious outdoor voice.

“Mmmm, nnnn!” Protesting with frantic arms, she holds up a finger to her clamped mouth, tears threatening to push out. While she’s never had to perform the challenge of the Splintershank herself, she’s seen kids fail here almost a dozen times. They always flee in a delirious fit from the cabin, often cut-up by the splintered wood, her brother included.

“Oh, sorry,” his voice now lower, “I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

After a few surreptitious glances between the tattered wall that obscures Arthur from them and Jarard’s casual grin, she opens her mouth a sliver or two. “This is the scariest part—just because you don’t have to jump anymore doesn’t mean it’s ‘easy’!” A few of the tears make good on their threats and flee her eyes to the tune of her breaking voice.

As if confronted with the Splintershank itself, Jarard fumbles to pull out tissues and stutters out a practiced line the heroes all say. “It’s all going to be okay, I b-believe in you,” trying to dab away tears as a cruel wind sets upon his small reserve of courage.

Managing not to sob, Marcy nods and wraps her arms around herself. She huddles close to the ground, protected from the worst of the frigid wind that shouldn’t be around for another couple months.

The cabin’s kitchen is a splintered maw camouflaged in autumn leaves. It plays host to a single chair, a solitary table, and a large metal stove painted reddish brown with time, bent

inward. Beneath the broken ribs of the floorboards lies a stone basement ten feet down, sparsely illuminated in the vanishing sun. Arthur hears his friends argue and panic outside, not sure what they're saying as some freak weather smothers all the sound.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Jarard’s fine. Marcy’s fine. Just a few minutes really, that’s all two hours is. That’s all...” Cocooning into his heavy jacket, rapidly becoming appropriate in the frosty temperature, Arthur lowers himself into the chair. *The checklist is almost complete at this point—just wait here until the observers say the sun sets, eyes closed, and then leave the same way you came in. That’s all you have to do. That’s all...*

“There are a bunch of creepy noises in there,” both members of Arthur’s audience huddle low to the ground in a spot the encroaching forest hasn’t hid from the slight sunlight, “and some kids say it talks to you right before the sun sets.” Honking her nose a bit louder than she wants, Marcy fights the urge to cry more.

“W-well, that’s why he’s got the big coat, right? He can’t get scared of stuff he can’t even hear,” despite the oasis of light, the wind has wrestled the heat in and around the cabin into a pinfall, “and besides, Arthur would never wuss-out when you’re—” Jarod sputters to change the direction of his reassurance, and pivots into another hero-line, “uhh, when you’re with all those that, uh, believe in each other!”

“Shhhhh!”

“S-sorry.”

The wind consumed any connection to Marcy and Jarard, and leave him with the rattle of the cabin, leaves that tackle one another, and a new, unique sound at the edge of his hearing. A penny dropped in a full piggy-bank—some metallic *plink* that couldn’t reverberate despite all the

open space in the room danced around Arthur's brain. *Is the wind blowing one of my zippers? Maybe there's old silverware in here? Leaves caught in the stove?*

Trying to shut out the senses that demand attention in the sightless, motionless void he forces himself to remain in, Arthur starts to hum some slipshod melody in his cocoon. The Splintershank could kill you if you made loud sounds that didn't come from stuff in the cabin already, like the aged furniture, and it could also trap you in the basement if you didn't step on the leaves. The hardest part should be getting to the kitchen on the dry, crunchy path that shifted around on a whim. Something else continuously made noise in this room, even though it *couldn't be*. Face buried under his hair and coat, there was no chance that a little hum could exit. *I'll be fine. Just something to keep my mind occupied. It has to have been at least half an hour by now.*

The wind picks up, the leaves rustle louder against the cabin, and the metallic noise fades. Arthur's unsteady little melody reminds him of home, and bed, and people that speak softly. Into the repetition now, he lets the melody drift into his mind rather than let any out of his mouth, just in case. Arthur stops humming, but the melody continues outside his head. Bars pass, notes falter in his brain, but they continue inside the kitchen, clear and... Cheery.

The waning song in his head chokes out as he gulps a few dollops of apprehension, but the hum in the room grows reedy, sharp, and increases in volume. Something else continues the tune, and the previous scrape of metal on metal picks up, a rhythmic *clink, clink* along with the bastard music. Pushing his eyelids together to the point of headache, Arthur curls his body inward, and pulls his legs and arms into his coat, morphing from cocoon into ball on the seat of the uneven chair. Coat sleeves hang limply at his sides, frozen. *I'll be fine...*

“Is that all?”

The hum stops. The steely *clink* stops. The wind stops.

“Is that everything you need to get out of here? Hide away and wait for little crybaby Marcy and timid little Jarard to yell for you? *Is that all?*” The voice goes back to its melody, as the strain of the cabin, the scrape of metal on metal, and the scratch of jagged wood assault the still space around Arthur.

The stove? Is the stove moving? Is the cabin falling apart?

The sun lowers, and with it, the embrace of light is nearly gone from the observers’ safety circle. Still huddled to the ground in the sliver of warmth left, they now share the purple jacket as a barrier against the persistent cold. They shift their eyes to and from the cabin, itching to yell as soon as the last of their platform drops into night.

“He would’ve r-ran out by now if he was g-gonna wuss out, right?” Freezing up, Jarard keeps his body in a ball underneath the stretch of cheap purple fabric.

Shivering a bit less, Marcy reassures herself, “It can’t be much longer. It just *can’t*.”

“We can take all the time we need, Arthur,” the voice, now a sordid hum and a smooth speaker at the same time, looms closer and closer to the bundle of trembling black fabric supported only by the unsteady frame of the ancient chair. “Or maybe, just maybe, the sun’s already set, and you’re free to get up and go, although you’d best open up—wouldn’t want to fall into my basement.”

Leaves, boards, and frigid air fall into a mouth of splintered wood that interrupts the melody, as if the entire floor has been consumed. Arthur’s foot probes out from his ball of warmth and tries to find space beneath; anything crunchy to anchor himself, anything to get a head-start on his escape. It’s just space. It’s just empty and full of the voice now.

“Go ahead. It can’t be much longer, right? If you were going to leave, you would have already, right?” A familiar rustle flits through the gaps in its speech; leaves move around and sound like they’re piling up into one spot inside the kitchen.

It’s not allowed to move the leaves. That’d be—

“That’d be cheating. Why would a monster cheat? Maybe it’s very hungry? Or really doesn’t like you, Arthur Q. Haroldson? Or maybe it doesn’t exist at all? Just open your eyes and you’d know, now wouldn’t you?”

There is no more wooden creak. There is no more rustle from the leaves. There is no more hum. There sits Arthur on his chair. Marcy and Jarard shout in a frenzy of broken voices that he can leave, but there is nothing outside the cabin, nothing for Arthur. The heavy crashes of the cabin buckling in on itself and being consumed by the basement is the only thing to act as company inside his head.

I need to leave. I need to get out of here. I’ll be fine.

His other leg pokes out, and he takes a small gamble—foot to floor. *Was that a crunch? I can’t tell. There’s so much... So much noise.* One foot in front of the other, Arthur squints a single eye open to try and see the orange and brown of leaves. Swept into a perfect path, the leaves are drawn in a curve back out into the hallway. The way is clear, even in the dark, made just for him.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Back through the hall, back into the foyer, still on the path of leaves. The door lies six feet ahead of him, just as he’s reached the end of the manufactured path. He can hear, in some distant world, Marcy and Jarard yells to him, as the wind berates their every word. Just past the door. Six feet. *That’s all.*

Arthur back-tracks a few feet, both eyes squint towards his escape, and he takes his leap from the path of safety into a brief stint of unknown. Midway through his short arc, he tries to recollect if the door was push or pull, the knob at the center of his vision through the sting of sweat and cold air. Pushed by the momentum of his jump, his body knocks against the door.

Thunk. Ca-thunk. The door does not budge the first two times. Arthur pulls the turned knob towards himself and collapses into the world of the known, the world where Marcy and Jarard have waited. Embracing him in a tear-soaked, snot-ridden hug, the three of them shuffle away from the cabin door.

“Let’s go home now, guys.”

“I c-can’t agree more.”

“ My mom’s expecting us.”

“Go on.”

Wind howls around the trio as the door blows shut. Arthur gives a quick glance back after reassuring the group of his mother’s famous hot chocolate awaits for them. Still huddled together, now protecting the sweat-strained boy from the unprecedented weather, they go back into town.

Arthur’s mother would always assume the long tear in the back of his coat was from playing around the splintered wood of that damned cabin.