

TIDEPOOL TADPOLES

by Lance Arthur Smith

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When the muck shifts without warning into a flight of suspended stepping-stones, you're there. The waves spool around your dirt-speckled ankles, and lift you up, up, up. The four monarchs need no instruction, no handshake or set of spoken commands to find this haven. They simply raise their legs, plant their bare feet into the sand, and walk.

Here they can breathe underwater, striding under the tide on a quest for treasure. The seaweed acts as their chariot harness, the sea denizens their steeds. The place is as real as your own senses, and tangible to those who rely on more than sight to perceive.

"HALT!" she bellows, her yellow cape shifting over her shoulders. S never intends to yell, but somehow her commands cause the sandbars to shake. She bends, the yellow tubing dangling from her waist. It's been dragging, a trench in the mud etched behind her. Through five-year-old fingers, she sifts the sand, searching. The dry ground seems strange considering its proximity to the tide line. No matter, she thinks. This is the spot. It has to be. "Let's head into the water right here."

An ocean wind wrinkles the top of her crown. She steadies the tall red monolith on her head, taking care not to bend its peaks. The crown is special; all in her band wear crowns, save one. Hers, however, is adorned with the wide white spots of her pedigree. It signifies her authority, and her responsibility to protect the coast. The coast of The Jolly is what she calls it, though the Wardens mistakenly refer to it as "LA **HOY-YA.**"

C belies his usually taciturn nature. "She's not here," the youngest monarch squeaks. Without a crown to protect it, his hair ripples across his brow and he struggles to keep it out of his eyes. The three girls swiftly turn, all of them frowning.

The youngest weren't up to the trip, S knows. But she wishes they were along all the same. Baby R and Baby P clung to their respective Wardens in the safety of The Shells, and that was where they should remain until S's return. She'd instructed the Wardens, told them of the mission's many dangers, and for once they listened to her and obeyed. Little B stayed behind as well, though she was no coward, S knew. She simply wanted to keep the others company.

F gestures toward the seafoam. The girl earned her reputation as the group's strategist time and time again. The white crests curl, forming steps up past the clouds. A nod from S is all it takes for A to whisk past all of them and onto the first step. Though A's impetuous actions had gotten them into many a predicament, it had also provided unexpected solutions. A stands on that first white step, beaming proudly. These foamy steps are solid. This is the way to the Beast. The only way to bypass the ocean below is to traverse the ocean above. F grabs her little brother, who stubbornly holds his ground. C, the group skeptic, doesn't like the look of the ocean ceiling. It's far too peaceful. He scoops up a crusty rock as protection, and then allows F to help him up.

The three remain planted, silently looking up. C bellows happily, but S splashes into the water below him. "Shhh..." she whispers, pointing up. The Beast lurks up there, and she is in no mood for noise. She could hear them coming, if they aren't careful. C quickly covers his mouth and holds up a hand in apology. Waves continue to careen against the steps, yet the steps hold. But for how long? Time runs short, and their task requires speed.

S pulls her crown tightly down against her curly hair. She motions for her crew to make way. With a runner's prep, she leans back then propels herself into the surf. One, two, three,

four, she bounds up each step, her stalwart companions bringing up the rear. C's small legs force him to use his entire body in ascending the foamy steps.

Arriving first at the large turquoise landing, S surveys the realm below her. The waves, the ocean, the sea life, all crane their heads skyward. They beg her help. The Beast has been the cause of a massive tempest and all the sea's denizens feel her agony.

A leaps next to S and the two embrace. Some steps behind, F pretends to roll her eyes impatiently, lingering back to keep an eye on C. That's what older sisters do, S knows. S rolls her eyes at P's silly faces and silly steps. Activity comes to a halt when the babies and littles stomp through an adventure.

No sooner do C and F join the quartet than the air crackles with silence. S extends her hand, palm out. Light green sparks flicker out from the atmosphere, but completely without sound. Led by S, the band pushes through the dense mist, ever closer to the upper ocean's gates.

Their bare feet buoyant against the foam, S finds her toes pushing deeper into the only thing keeping her from falling down into the depths below. Their steps can't be fading so quickly. She never would have brought them if- no. This must be some illusion, some trick of the Beast meant to dissuade passersby.

One step. Another. And- CRACK! The stairs split apart, in silence. C falls first, but F catches him by the wrist and flips him onto the gates' threshold. S grabs A and dives forward, securing the other two of her crew. The foam steps curdle then dissipate, leaving no evidence of their existence. Minimal dew dots the team's foreheads. As one organism, they each use their hands to wipe away the moisture.

C opens his mouth, words about to spew, but again S quiets him with a glance. He smiles and shakes his head. He's not speaking.

“This better be worth it.” F shakes her head as she voices concern, knowing even before she finishes that she may have doomed them all.

BARRRROOOOOOOOOOOM! BARRRROOOOOOOOOOOM! Each bellow causes the travellers to pause. The Beast is in marked pain, making her that much more dangerous to confront. There is no room for error, now.

The key to the Beast’s pain is the spike, S recalls. Their group, Wardens included, witnessed the Beast rise from the foam. She was beautiful, birthed from the waves. Her arms lifted high in greeting, and she plodded forward. The behemoth was beautiful, and F remarked how lovely her hair had been styled. Then it all went wrong. Her hair, matted as it was, seemed to bog down her entire apparatus. Arms flailing, she lurched ahead into the surf but the pull of the tide proved to be her undoing. Wave upon wave crashed into her and the unthinkable happened- she lost her head. Held aloft by a thin spire, the Beast’s head tilted awkwardly, and then fell upon its foundation. The spike passed up through the top of her head, but the Beast fought to correct the problem. Using every erg of her formidable, though finite, power, she pushed off the ocean floor and catapulted into the sky’s ocean.

Jolted back to the present by the Beast’s cries, S knows the ocean cannot survive with this tumult much longer. Storms threaten to tear apart the beachfront in a matter of hours. She splits her crew on either side of the threshold. A seaweed gate stands between the heroes and their quarry. A’s fear glides onto F and C, but S touches each of them on the arm in reassurance. Triumph is all they have known, all they will know. S circles her arms. In truth, this gesture holds little meaning for the rest of the crew, but the three assume that their Chief desires some sort of formation to surround their prey. They nod their assent.

Sans sound, sans a concrete plan, they move through the vegetative gates into the Beast's lair. A's surprise echoes that of S. The area is open and light, and various forms of windfish swim their way through the cloudy currents. Despite its lack of size, a Precipetacean pauses to unleash a glorious downpour, however brief, upon the party. Clouds of seafoam make up the majority of the space, and the Beast slinks, head askew, at the far end. Her large, wide eyes stare unblinking at S. S holds a hand out, asking her friends to pause while she makes her way forward.

The Beast shudders, and attempts to hoist herself up on the spike. This causes further torment, however, and her head slides gently down into her stomach. AOOOOOOWWWOOOO!

F looks to S and mutters "I certainly wouldn't feel at all well, what with a spike through my cranium." S nods agreement and slowly moves forward. The other three stand rooted in place, not daring to move, though C does shimmy out of the way of a jellystar passing erratically by.

"LEAVE ME BE!" The Beast swipes with her great appendages, though S remains safely out of striking distance. Holding out her hand for the object, S never takes her eyes off the Beast. Heaven knows what havoc she's capable of wreaking. Somersaulting forward, A places a tuft of yellow cord into S's outstretched palm. Perhaps the sight of her own ringlets will calm the Beast. This piece of hair was torn from the rest of her mane when her head collapsed; perhaps she will understand why the travellers have come.

She stirs. The Beast meanders sideways, dangerously sizing up the crew before her. "I CAN DESTROY YOU, IF I WISH. WHO ARE YOU TO FOLLOW ME HERE?"

Though a lesser hero might turn tail and leap into the depths below, S stands firm. She grabs a passing foam wisp and places the yellow cord gently on top. With a purse of her lips, S

blows the cloud over to her adversary. Certainly a sign of their intentions, S believes. The Beast must understand what her rage has done. Perhaps the missing piece of her cranium will calm her.

“Together, we have the power to destroy you, if WE wish. But we do not. We need a fifth member of our team. We witnessed your birth, and saw how the sea warmed up to your presence. But the storms are growing with your anger, and the coastline will not survive.” She must understand, thinks S. She must.

C waddles forward, pulling out a bottle of glue as big as his thigh. “Please trust me, ‘kay?” The Beast nods. C squirts a strip of adhesive onto the Beast’s mane. F hoists A up on her shoulders. Though wobbly, A is able to grab the floating strand of yellow and attach it to the Beast’s lower temple.

Then, as one unit, the four adventures assume their positions on the circumference of the Beast’s head. No words are needed. As one, they push. Up, up the spire the head slides, until a simple twist locks the cranium into place. The Beast smiles, golden sparks blasting from the joint. She cries, her tears forming waterfalls through the misty ground.

Blinding light suddenly cascades the crew down from the upper ocean via a waterfall, under the seafoam, and back onto shore with a gentle THUMP. Their bare feet touch down into muddy surf, with neither the Wardens nor the Inhabitants the wiser. They have triumphed among the tidepools. S had her doubts, in all honesty. But as F grabs C’s rock and makes for camp, C skipping after his older sister, S wonders why she worried at all. The Beast is no longer a Beast, and the sea breathes again.

A steps behind and takes S’s hand in her own. In a few months, A will wear the Chieftain crown, and only the sea and the stars can know her adventures.