

Mina tore ferociously, yet precisely, at the never-ending earth before her. The white-furred mouse's crimson cloak fluttered about behind her, trail obvious just above the surface. Behind her giving chase wasn't some magical, mystical menace nor anyone planning devious machinations. In fact, it had nothing to do with why she came to this island in the first place. The slithering creature behind her was naught but a garden snake, who simply spotted a morsel to snatch up for dinner! He was a typical garden snake, lines of yellow streaking down his body, with black scales atop and yellow underbelly beneath. A common reptile such as this would be no bother to most, but to a mouse – even one as proficient and skilled as Mina – it was very serious business. The hungry had spotted her easily, the light-colored rodent popping out of the ground, wearing a red cloak and vest and swinging some kind of whip around.

To the snake, however, a mouse was a mouse, and a meal was a meal.

Lucky for Mina, the snake hadn't anticipated just how skilled she was in both fighting and fleeing, the mouse knowing when to pick her battles. Mina grunted and powered forward faster than a fish through water beneath the earth, discarded debris working to slow the chasing snake down. While the serpent was small enough to fit in the little tunnel she was hollowing out, it was a tight fit, and Mina was separating from him each passing moment. Beads of sweat flicked off her face but she endured, knowing her greatest odds of survival were putting as much dirt between her and the scaly predator behind her. It got hotter in the tunnel the more she dug, and the mouse eventually poked her head up out of the loose earth above, catching her breath and turning to see if she was still being pursued.

The obvious bulges along the ground, wider further back thanks to the snake, seemed to be no longer active. Nothing was in the tunnel anymore. Mina blew out a relieved breath and wiped her glistening brow, though her big ears were still on high alert. It's likely the snake, like many would-be Mina-chompers before, had given up. There was much easier prey to snatch, as Mina herself could outrun, or outfight, most. Those unfortunate to try and fight for their meal met the business end of a spiky whip and wouldn't be hunting anything for a while, if ever. Mina's heart rate calmed as the quiet seconds ticked by, bright moonlight illuminating the otherwise-dark plains, with no signs of anything around.

“Finally,” Mina said, stowing her whip. She started hauling herself out of her latest hollow when her nose twitched. The mouse’s head spun in time to see a looming skinny presence blotting out a part of the moon. In the glow she could make out the frustrated snake, its slitted pupils narrowing on the prone mouse, tongue flickering audibly. “You’re kidding me!” Mina sighed and quickly retreated back into the hole. She could stand her ground and fend the serpent off there and then, but she didn’t want to chance it. Mina knew her abilities well, and though she could beat back a snake if cornered, they were wily and determined things, these predators. Plus, one stumble and she was mouse chow. So instead of taking the snake head-on, Mina dove right back into her hollow, cursing that she’d let her pursuer catch up. Dirt flew as cloak, kicking hinds, and wiry tail vanished beneath the earth once more.

Anticipating another lengthy pursuit, Mina ignored fatigue and dug as fast as she could, pulling along beneath the earth faster than she could move on solid ground (not to mention how much quicker the snake would be on land). She’d be sore in the morning but that was better than taking residence inside nature’s own hollow, deep down a snake’s gullet! Mina didn’t look back, ears ringing from the constant churn of earth around her. She assumed she couldn’t hear the pursuit with the sounds of digging drowning it out, but she realized what was transpiring when her claws peeled through air suddenly, her hollow opening up into what was already wide open space in her little tunnel! She grabbed blindly forward again, and felt the scrape of not dirt, but scales, against her paws.

There, a few inches ahead of her, was the snake! It had poked down ahead of her, able to move much faster on land, and simply waited for Mina to dig her way to him! He was certainly no hollower, but all he had to do was follow the trail of earth, get ahead of the tunneling mouse, and intercept. He hissed in delight, Mina gasping as the full frown of the slobbering snake maw yawned wide before her. She didn’t panic, instead starting to crawl backwards. She just barely made it out of harm’s way, snake jaws clashing down a millimeter in front of her snout. It did, however, snag her cape, the snake hissing threateningly and pulling. Mina gagged a second, her own clothing serving to choke her, and she rapidly undid the clasp to give it up. She skittered backwards, seeing the serpent slurp the mouse-flavored cape up and gulp it down without a thought, before continuing his trek forward. Mina panted in exertion, not able to move nearly as fast backwards as forwards, desperate for a way out. If she dug up, or a turn-around, anything other than backpedaling, her life was over. Her panting grew more rapid the

longer the chase went on, muscles beginning to sting and ache from all the activity. Mina had to end this sooner rather than later.

She had to fight! Mina reached for her whip, it along with vials still clipped to her vest, and went to ready it. But the snake was too quick! He splayed his jaws wide again, and this time there was no cape to substitute for Mina. The mouse barely got a grip on her weapon's handle when the snake struck. She cried out, grip lost, cringing in pain when scaly lips clamped over her ears! "No!" she exclaimed, being dragged forward and losing her whip entirely. What vials of use she had broke, leaving scattered liquids and broken glass in their wake in the tunnel behind her, Mina's four paws kicking and scrabbling for purchase to halt herself. The snake's grip, however, was vice-like, and he simply retreated with his prey in tow.

Changing tact, Mina braced paws against the drool-slicked scales of the snake's lips and pushed. She could live with whatever injury ensued from yanking her ears free (and it wouldn't be the first tight scrape she'd gotten out of). Gritting her teeth, she pushed and grunted, but the hungry snake's hold was relentless. She felt more than heard the hiss from within those jaws as the garden snake gradually pulled his way up out of the hole he'd invaded from. Smelling the fresh air and certain doom, Mina formed a fist and gave the snake's snout a rapid punch, followed by a vicious clawing from the other. The snake, head nearly free, loosed his grip from the assault, Mina's ears pulled free! No longer held back, Mina toppled backwards, keeping her bearings and rapidly turning to flee down the tunnel. She thought herself free, until a shock of pain roared from the tip of her tail. "Let me go!" she demanded, whipping her tail back and forth, kicking powerful hind paws, but the tip remained stuck. The snake's eyes narrowed, but was satisfied, knowing there was no chance to escape. Mina, heart pounding, was desperate enough to sacrifice those few inches of tail in that moment. She clenched her eyes shut and committed, and moved to chomp at her own tail and escape. Just as she moved, her body was yanked backwards. Mina nearly bit her tongue instead of her tail, chin bashing against the dirt, leaving the mouse momentarily woozy.

The garden snake's tongue vibrated against the bit of tail he'd snagged, his close-mouthed hissed indicating his pleasure and triumph. He slowly extracted the rest of himself and the dazed Mina up and out, the serpent at the end of Mina's hollow victorious in his hunt. Mina came to with a shake of her head, finding herself dangled several inches in the air. The sting at the base of her tail – the thing holding all her

weight – nagged at her as she tried to focus. The renowned inventor and hollower was reduced to nothing but a dangling victim for the simple-minded snake, the humiliation making Mina's cheeks flush red. But there was more than a reputation at stake, of course, with serpent drool starting to filter down her trapped tail, trickling down her pantsless rear and seeping into her vest. "Let me *go*, you vile thing!" she demanded, trying to kick the snake right in his smug face with sharp-clawed hinds. Mina fought and whirled about in the air until the garden snake lazily tossed Mina up with a flick of his head. Mina gasped with wide eyes, limbs flailing, the mouse doing a half-rotation in the air, leading her head to fall right into an awaiting set of serpent jaws. "No!" A shocked expression was doused from the world when the snake closed his mouth triumphantly around his supper's head and chest. Mina's paws, bound at the wrists and jammed to her sides, scrabbled fitfully against drooling lips. Her hinds kicked violently despite her belly being crushed by the jaws, teeth teasing into her fur and against vulnerable flesh. Despite her head being millimeters from the gullet with which she knew there was no escape, she bore a vicious glare and fought with all her might. "Let me OUT!" Mina furiously struggled, doubling her efforts when her large ears and head were casually swallowed into the hungry snake's throat, bulging the scales audibly at the top of the predator's neck. She felt more of her mousy body squelch into the maw, leaving only her legs, frantically-thrashing tail, and white-furred butt protruding. Her demands were naught but muffled noises emanating from the snake, the mouse already halfway-consumed by the greedy garden snake.

The serpent didn't waste time with such a delicious, feisty meal. He knew the longer this prolonged, the more the slim odds of escape would grow. As such, the snake tipped his head towards the sky, and allowed gravity to assist in swallowing the vanishing Mina whole. The mouse's tail dangled under the snake's chin, as her stomach pressed firmly to the roof of his mouth. All was dark for Mina, and her ears were compressed to her skull and the surrounding throat, forcing her to hear every throbbing swallow in gruesome detail, slobber and mouse pulled down with every undulation. Mina gritted her teeth and kicked her legs every which way, the lengthy hindpaws scratching scales harmlessly about, until the snake's jaws snapped forward and caught her by the toes! With another lewd slurp, the soles now joined her belly in pressing to the roof of the maw, tips of ankles barely visible over her protruding furry rear. The dangling tail twitched back and forth, but between the extended chase and compressed torso, Mina was running out of air. She had enough to stay conscious, but her muscles were burning from exertion, and with less room to maneuver than ever and every breath threatened

with all the viscous drool flowing around, she knew the fight was over. That didn't stop from her fighting 'til the end, however, the snake feeling the tensed-up body of his supper quiver and wiggle to try and break free from a fate of snake food.

Ultimately the garden snake's superior strength and advantage were more than enough to eat Mina alive. The mouse's wriggling rear end was conquered as snake jaws crawled over and under it, several noisy gulps pulling the bulging form of the hollower further down, stretched scales being more than accommodating. The forked tongue hissed out under that butt and retracted, messy jaws closing around Mina's body completely and only leaving half a tail protruding. Like a spaghetti noodle, the snake slurped the limp thing inward, it writhing about until it vanished with a spurt of snake saliva. Mina cringed as her tail bundled up against her rump, the knowledge that she was nothing but food now creeping into her consciousness. With her rear gradually flowing backwards, she bellowed an anguished, rage-filled cry, heard to the snake only, who ignored the tune he'd heard dozens of times from other hapless rodents.

The garden snake swallowed Mina whole a moment later, a roaring **GLURK** echoed out to the field. The stretched scales noisily bulged downward with Mina gradually dragged away from salvation and towards her ultimate demise. She continued to squirm but all her limbs were trapped between muscle and her own body, save her tail, which flicked like mad on her way down. The snake hissed in pleasure and lowered himself, to slink on his now-sated belly along the grass, and meander back to his nest. It would be some time before he would have to hunt again, as the mouse would serve as plentiful nutrients for the foreseeable future. Mina groaned at the feel of the snake slithering away, still being ushered along to where the faint gurgling tells of a stomach could be near. Panic, held at bay for so long, corrupted Mina's heart when she slipped into the snake belly proper. Her breathing was stilted and quick, her form becoming bundled in her cloak that the snake had eaten prior to his main course of mouse. Drool was replaced with much stronger fluid, stinging acids that were acrid to Mina's sensitive nose, already working to sizzle away at her cloak and still-worn vest. Mina wormed about to try and wrap herself in her eaten cloak, knowing in her heart that it only delayed the inevitable, but desperate to prolong her survival in the off-chance she'd make it out in one piece.

In a way, that's exactly what happened.

The garden snake, full of hollower, coiled up contently in a spiral in his nest, safe from predatory birds and other creatures that would happily turn *him* into a meal. About a third of the way down his body, shifting rodent bulges were prominent. Over the coming days, Mina would graduate further down the belly, leaving shreds of her digesting cloak behind. Her vest was made of tough stuff, but it was immaterial: The invading fluids dug into Mina's fur and seeped to the inside of her vest, leaving no hair or whisker untouched. Days trapped in the blind, stinging darkness of nature's own hollow broke Mina's spirit completely, and while the snake dozed, Mina cried out for help. She'd managed to get one foreleg free and scratched crazily at the impervious stomach lining, digestion taking its course regardless of the prey's tenacity.

Days later, the bulge fell still, the groans from the snake's midsection dominating. Mina's consciousness slipped away forever, the mouse nearly drowned in the hard-working stomach acids, the former hollower and inventor defeated, devoured, and digesting in the bowels of a simple-minded snake. Days further, the bulging form became shapeless, softening into an unrecognizable blob, that would feel only somewhat-solid and bumpy to the touch. The snake had awoken only to quench his thirst but otherwise was content to sleep his delicacy of a meal away, fueling his own body for future hunts.

With more than two weeks elapsed since she was eaten alive, Mina returned to the world in one piece. The snake had crept out of its den and hacked up the remains of Mina the Hollower. He didn't give much pause to the fact that the mouse was indeed sturdier than most, a nearly-fully-intact skeleton spewing from his jaws and messily splattering to earth. Indeed, a tattered vest still wrapped up the softened rib cage, and only a few broken bones were missing or cracked throughout. The skull stared lifelessly to the sky, limbs and tail sprawled every direction. The snake left what remained of his scrumptious meal behind, not looking any bigger than he had before as a result of his meal, eager to hunt once more.

Mina the Hollower was never heard from again.