

A Question Of Ways

By

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"We accept the love we think we deserve..."

Stephen Chbosky

The tunnels Below had their own kind of music. The drip of water from stone to stone, the rustle of candle flames in the drafts, the soft echo of footsteps padding across earth and wood. For most who lived there, it was a comfort. The symphony of safety, far removed from the clamour of the city Above. But sometimes, that music was drowned out by voices. Loud voices.

"You're doing it *wrong*, Mouse!" Winslow's gravel-edged baritone rolled through the chamber, bouncing from the stone walls. "You can't just tie things together and hope they'll hold! One good shake and the whole scaffolding comes down on our heads!"

Mouse bristled where he crouched beside his project, fingers tangled in twine, a wild curtain of hair half-hiding his face.

"Not wrong! Not wrong, Winslow. Strong enough. Always strong enough. Knows what Mouse is doing." His hands moved quickly, tugging a knot tighter, pulling a plank of scavenged wood into place.

Winslow crossed his arms, looming over the smaller man. His massive shoulders seemed to block half the lantern light.

"You think you know, but we got more than just you walking down these passageways. Kids come through here. Old folks. You cut corners, someone gets hurt. That's on all of us."

"Not cutting corners!" Mouse snapped, his voice rising to an uncharacteristic shout. "Making things work. Fast. Efficient. Got other projects waiting. Big ones!"

From the shadows near the entry, a few of the children had gathered to watch, wide-eyed. Arguments between grown-ups always carried a strange magnetism,

like a storm building in the distance. Kipper whispered something to Samantha, and she shushed him quickly.

Winslow noticed, his expression tightening. He didn't like children seeing division, didn't like the way fear could spread when voices clashed in the caverns.

He lowered his tone, though the edge remained. "Mouse. Listen. I know you've got your way. But sometimes your way ain't the safest. We've got standards down here for a reason."

Mouse stood suddenly, surprising Winslow, who was used to him keeping low, skittering about like one of the very creatures whose name he bore. Mouse's eyes gleamed with something fierce in the lamplight.

"Mouse has standards too! Mouse keeps people safe. Built bridges. Fixed pipes. Made lantern system work. Without Mouse, many things broken still."

Winslow didn't answer right away. He could feel the weight of the children's stares and the silence in the tunnel pressing on them both. He wanted to snap back, but Father's voice echoed in his mind. *'We must always seek to build, not to break...'*

He exhaled heavily. "All right," he rumbled. "Then show me. Prove it's safe. Let's test this... whatever it is you're building."

Mouse's face lit with stubborn pride. "Yes. Test. Will see. Mouse knows."

The makeshift structure creaked as Mouse stepped back, motioning toward it like a magician unveiling his trick. It was a small platform, built from scavenged planks and rope, meant to help with repairs along a difficult stretch of wall where seepage was threatening the supports. A clever idea but cleverness and strength were not always the same thing.

Winslow strode forward, planting a boot on the first plank. It held. He set his full weight on it and the rope gave a long, low groan. The children gasped and waited. All wide-eyed and staring.

Winslow's eyes flicked to Mouse. "Still holding!" Mouse said quickly, hands twitching as if he wanted to reach forward, to steady the structure, to will it not to fail.

Winslow shifted, distributing his weight differently. Another groan. One of the knots slipped a fraction of an inch. "Mouse," Winslow said flatly, "this thing's one sneeze away from collapsing."

"No, no, no!" Mouse darted forward, tugging the rope back into place, his voice high with desperation. "Not collapse. Just needs... adjustment. Little adjustment."

Winslow stepped off, shaking his head. "Adjustment ain't good enough when people's lives are on the line."

The chamber was silent but for Mouse's quick, shallow breaths. His hands hovered over the rope, fingers trembling. The silence stretched too long, and finally Winslow turned, his heavy boots carrying him toward the children.

He clapped his hands, forcing cheer into his gravelly tone. "All right, show's over. Back to your studies. This ain't something you need to see."

They scattered reluctantly, casting glances back at Mouse. He stood alone by his half-finished structure, shoulders hunched, hair falling forward like a curtain to hide his face.

Winslow lingered in the archway, his back half-turned. His voice softened, though it carried a note of finality. "We'll talk more later, Mouse. But we're gonna do this the right way."

Mouse didn't answer. His silence was louder than any words.

Father's study smelled of old books and candle wax. The walls were lined with volumes salvaged from Above, their spines worn but loved, and the great desk was cluttered with papers, maps of the tunnels, and half-finished cups of tea. Winslow sat across from Father, his massive frame awkward in the delicate wooden chair.

He rubbed the back of his neck, frustration seeping into every movement. "...I'm telling you, Jacob, he's reckless. Brilliant, sure, but reckless. If we let him keep building like that, it's only a matter of time before something goes wrong."

Father steepled his fingers, his brows knitting together. "Mouse is... unconventional. But his work has saved us time and again. The lantern system alone, why, we would be groping in the dark without his ingenuity."

Winslow leaned forward. "I ain't denying his smarts. I'm saying he don't think about the people using what he builds. It's all about speed with him, patching things together quick, so he can move on to the next idea. One day that's gonna cost us dearly."

Father sighed. He knew Winslow was right. At least partly. But he also knew Mouse, the lonely scavenger who had found family only in these tunnels, who carried his worth like fragile glass, always afraid someone would find it wanting.

"Perhaps," Father said slowly, "Mouse does not need reprimand so much as guidance. He is... sensitive to criticism. If he feels attacked, he will withdraw, and that would be a loss for all of us."

Winslow let out a humourless laugh. "He already feels attacked. Everything's personal with him. You tell him a knot's tied wrong, and it's like you told him *he's* wrong. Don't know how to get through to him without setting him off."

Father's eyes softened. "Then perhaps we must try not to get through *to* him, but *with* him. Collaboration, Winslow. If you and he could find a way to work together, to balance his creativity with your caution. Why, it might be exactly what this community needs."

Winslow grunted, unconvinced. But a small part of him, the part that remembered Mouse's wide, fearful eyes when the children gasped at the creaking platform, wondered if Father was right.

Mouse hated silence. Silence meant people were thinking about him. Judging. Deciding if Mouse belonged, if Mouse was useful enough, or if Mouse would be cast back into the lonely shadows he'd once lived in. So he filled silence with sound: mutters, the clink of tools, the rasp of rope through his fingers. Tonight, though, even Mouse's restless noise seemed swallowed by the deeper tunnels. He had fled here after Winslow's words, away from the main passages where curious eyes might follow.

He crouched in a narrow cavern, surrounded by half-finished contraptions—wheels, pulleys, bits of scavenged machinery from Above. To anyone else it looked like a junk heap, but to Mouse it was possibility. Pieces of the future.

"Not wrong," he whispered fiercely to himself, tugging at a copper pipe. "Never wrong. Knows how to fix. Always fixes. Just... faster, better, smarter."

But the memory of the rope slipping under Winslow's weight gnawed at him. The gasps of the children echoed louder than any cavern drip. "Not wrong," Mouse repeated, though softer now.

A heavy scrape of boot against stone made him whirl, hair flying from his face. His heart lurched.

"Easy, Mouse," Winslow said from the tunnel mouth, his form filling the space like a shadow made solid.

Mouse hunched, arms wrapping protectively around his tools. "Followed Mouse. Always following. Want to tell Mouse wrong again."

Winslow stepped inside, ducking his head under the low arch. "Ain't here to pick a fight." He glanced around at the collection of scraps and inventions, his brow furrowing with something halfway between puzzlement and respect. "Looks like you been busy down here."

Mouse sniffed. "Always busy. That's what Mouse does. Finds things, builds things, makes life better. Without Mouse, things fall apart."

Winslow crouched a little, trying to make his massive presence less overwhelming. "Ain't saying you don't make things better. You do. But sometimes better's gotta mean safer too."

Mouse's eyes flashed. "Safe, yes. Mouse makes safe. Just... not your way. Mouse way." He jabbed a finger toward Winslow, words tumbling fast now. "Winslow's way is slow. Careful. Careful until everything stops. Mouse's way keeps things moving. Keeps people alive."

Winslow looked down at him, a slow smile spreading. "Guess that's your part."

For a moment they just stared at each other, the storm-muted world Above forgotten, the community waiting behind them forgotten. Then, together, they began. Mouse's fingers flew as he tied knots, faster than most eyes could follow but this time, every knot was double-checked.

Winslow crouched beside him, calloused hands steadying the ropes, pointing out where a line needed tightening, where a plank needed shifting. They moved like two parts of a machine: Mouse's speed and creativity meshing with Winslow's strength and caution.

The crisis came three days later. A storm Above had driven rain down through the city's underbelly, finding every crack and seam. In the deeper passages, water seeped steadily into the walls, turning once-solid ground into treacherous mud. One of the main support beams along a vital tunnel had begun to give way, leaning at a dangerous angle. If it collapsed, the passage would close, cutting off an important route between the central chambers and the outer storage caverns.

The Council convened quickly. Father's voice was grave as he explained the danger, but his gaze kept flicking between Winslow and Mouse. "This will require swift action," he said. "And careful hands. Both."

Mouse's heart raced. A big project. Dangerous. Important. The kind of thing Mouse lived for, and feared. All eyes would be on him.

Winslow gave a short nod. "We'll handle it."

The tunnel was narrow, the air heavy with damp. A lantern flickered against stone walls streaked with moisture. The great wooden beam leaned precariously, groaning now and then like some wounded giant.

Mouse darted forward, examining the ground, the cracks, the way the water pooled. His words tumbled in a rapid stream: "If we brace here, use pulleys, shift the weight. Yes, yes, can hold it long enough to slide new beam in place. Needs leverage. Needs counterweight."

Winslow planted his hands on his hips, studying the problem from a different angle. "All right. We get ropes across the ceiling, haul it back upright while we wedge in the new support. But it's gonna take strength. Lot of it."

Mouse's eyes gleamed. "Strength, yes. Winslow's part. But balance too. If pull too hard, beam snaps. Need careful control."

Winslow looked down at him, a slow smile spreading. "Guess that's your part."

When the pulleys were set, Winslow gripped the rope and braced his boots against the slick floor. "On three," he said. "One... two..."

"*Wait!*" Mouse darted in, adjusting a knot by half an inch. He looked up, wild hair falling from his face. "*Now!*"

Winslow pulled. The rope groaned. The beam shuddered, then slowly, agonizingly, began to lift. Water dripped faster from the ceiling, as if the tunnel itself was holding its breath.

"Steady, steady!" Mouse called, his hands guiding the rope, adjusting tension, feeding slack at just the right moments. Winslow's muscles bunched, veins standing out on his arms, sweat mixing with the damp.

"Beam's moving!" he grunted. "Get that support ready!"

Mouse scrambled, sliding the new beam into position. "Almost... almost... now!"

With one final heave, Winslow hauled the rope taut, and the leaning support creaked back into place. Mouse jammed the new beam into position, wedging it tight against the old. The wood groaned—then settled.

Silence. The tunnel held.

For a long moment, the two men simply stood there, breathing hard, listening to the quiet. Then Mouse let out a whoop, his laughter echoing wildly. "It worked! It worked! Knew it would—well, almost knew—mostly knew!"

Winslow leaned on the rope, chuckling low. "Gotta admit, Mouse. You were right. Couldn't have done it without you."

Mouse blinked, the words hitting him harder than any praise Father had ever given. "Winslow said... right?"

"Yeah," Winslow said simply. "Right."

Mouse grinned so wide it nearly split his face. "And Mouse couldn't have done it without Winslow. Too heavy, too strong. Would've gone crash, smash, water everywhere. But together..." He waved his arms, trying to find words big enough. "...together is best."

Winslow clapped him on the back. Gently, for Winslow. "Together's how we survive down here."

When they returned to the central chamber, wet and tired but triumphant, the community was waiting. Children crowded around Mouse, peppering him with questions: "Did it work? Was it scary? How'd you do it?"

Mouse puffed up, ready to launch into a breathless explanation of pulleys and counterweights, but then his eyes flicked to Winslow. Winslow gave him a small nod. Mouse straightened, speaking louder than usual, with a new steadiness in his tone.

"Mouse and Winslow fixed it. Together. Mouse had ideas, Winslow had strength. Both ways. That's how it worked."

Father's eyes shone with pride. Vincent inclined his head, silent approval in his golden gaze. The children cheered. Mouse's chest swelled. Not just because of what he had built, but because of what he had learned: that Mouse's way didn't have to mean alone.

That night, the tunnels sang again with their strange music—the drip of water, the rustle of candlelight, the murmur of voices sharing food and warmth. And in a smaller chamber off the main hall, Mouse and Winslow sat together, tools spread between them, sketching plans for the next repair. Winslow grinned as Mouse's hands danced over the page, drawing faster than words could keep up. "Reckon we'll be busy a while, partner."

Mouse giggled, nodding furiously. "Busy is good. Together is better."

And in the deep, hidden heart of the world Below, a friendship was forged. Not out of sameness, but out of two ways that, at last, had found harmony.

"Good friends, good books, and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life..."

Mark Twain