

The Forest

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I ORDER A salad. Three mates and I are in the car waiting for our order.

“I can’t believe you ordered a salad,” teases Bobby, the driver.

“I couldn’t be bothered with anything else,” I plead.

“We’re not sharing any of ours when you get hungry,” says Vincent. He rides shotgun.

“I just don’t like big meals when I might be doing a lot of movement.” My case was not looking strong.

Julian just looks at me and snorts, “To each his own I guess.” At least he was OK with it.

We drive for about two and a half hours. Julian has fallen asleep, each snore rattling the window he leans on.

“I don’t think there is another town for two hours at least,” Vincent says constantly, checking the map as we drive.

“Then we’re in the right place!” Exclaims Bobby, more excited than any of us. We stop the car on the side of the road. We start to unload the car, taking a few things each.

Vincent consults the map again, “Uhh, that way . . . I think.” He points toward the forest. It is so dark that we only see five metres in. “It should be about a forty-five minute walk in.” We blindly follow his advice and start off.

The forest is wild in its complete stillness. Each branch as thick as a bulky arm, vines intertwine with everything. Birds can be heard chirping deep within. I take a step in; I have a small pocket knife big enough that I can swing around creating a rather crude path. Every now and then

a vine falls, it touches my skin, and it is completely moist. My skin becomes wet and it sends a shiver down my spine every time. I realise I can no longer hear my mates anymore.

Suddenly a bird flies at my face, feathers everywhere, it shows fear, like I have never seen; it is running from something, something unknown. Strange animals swing at me from time to time. Some run, some attack. One gets its claws in my arm. I can feel each nail pierce my skin, going deeper the more I struggle. The animal struggles itself. Its fur stands up on end as it growls at me. Blood trickles from the wound, I watch as each drop falls to the ground like rain from my arm. I swing my knife in the animal's face, cutting it. My blood mixes with its. It squeals a high pitch noise in pain. Its claws retract and it leaps away.

I continue until I get to a small clearing. I just see the sun through the tops of the trees. I have been walking for thirty-five minutes so this must be the spot. I look around; I can't hear or see any sign of them. I place my backpack on a tree and take a seat by it. The others shouldn't be too long.

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I must have dozed off. The remaining light is dimmer than before. I am still alone; this is not right. I spot some flowers that must have bloomed whilst I slept. Their petals are a rich orange and red. I lean over for a closer look. I smell it, a burning building. I smell each flame, each cloud of smoke. I carefully cut the flower and put it away. Somehow I feel that people needed to smell this flower.

I don't have many supplies left. My backpack contains only a few items: a drink bottle, a spare knife, a lighter, the salad, and a small bag of rations. I eat the rations, it contains some meat and an apple, barely enough for a meal. I must have forgotten to replace my rations before I left. I had been in the clearing for a while. I need to cover as much distance as possible if I am to survive.

The animals seem quiet and sleeping at what I assume is night. I don't see any light through the trees. I keep moving forward, ignoring the crunch of every leaf and bug I come across.

"oo lost?" a weird voice speaks.

I look around, just trees and more trees. "Huh, who's there?"

"Down 'ere twit," says the voice again, this time in a nasty tone. I look down and by my leg is a little man, no taller than my knee. He is rather well dressed; he wears a black suit with a green shirt and black

tie and has his hands in his pockets. "Yea ya see me now don't cha?" I am rather bewildered by this man

"What are you?" He can see the cluelessness in my eyes as he inspects me.

He put up his little hand, "I'm Richard, the elf." He gestures at me again. I grab and shake it. His grip could've broken my hand had it been big enough. "Wot are ya doin' in the forest anyway?" He asks, putting his hand back in his pocket. "And why are ya dressed so poorly?" I am a little dumbfounded by his question but answer anyway.

"I was separated from my friends and ended up here."

"So dat's why ya dressed terribly."

"Terribly," I scoff at the little man. "I'm dressed appropriately for the wild," I fume. "Why are you dressed like you are about to go to a dinner party?" I feel my face go red, there is no reason for me to get mad.

"Elfs know dat ya 'ave ta look ya best no matter the circumstance." I can't argue, he is very dapper.

"Can you help me get to my mates?" I plead. He paces back and forth for a little while and looks back at me.

"OK, I 'aven't got anything better ta do." He smiles at me, and jumps, with a few perfectly executed flips, square on my shoulder. He is so light that I can't feel his weight. "Umm . . . go dat way." He points in front of us and off we walk.

We travel through the forest for about ten minutes, each step closer to being reunited. Something is off; the elf is suspiciously quiet. I look to my shoulder, his legs are dangling, but not in front of me, as though he was reaching behind me. "Oi, get out of my bag." He jumps and quickly repositions himself.

"I wasn't in ya bag," he pleads.

"I just saw you."

"But you 'ave such good stuff."

I stop walking to face him properly, "You're probably just leading me in the wrong direction," he is looking down and twiddling his thumbs.

"I'm sorry, I jus' never see big people much." I can see how bad the elf feels, he was on the verge of sobbing.

"Hey, hey," I try to calm him down, "I wasn't trying to insinuate anything, it's just I've only just met you and I do not know what you're like."

The elf's expression changes, "Nah, its ok." I reach into my backpack and pull out the salad and the spare knife.

"It's not much and you might not like it, but take these." I hand them to him. His face lights up and he lets out a light squeal.

"Thank you, thank you." The elf gives me a hug and I hear him try and cover a sniff. "Ya a good person." He wipes his face on his sleeve and sits back on my shoulder.

"There's a clearing up ahead, we should rest there for a while."

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The elf pulls out the knife and swings it around like a sword; it's just as big as he is. He cuts part of the vines and leaves creating all sorts of shapes. I sit there, watching him have the most fun of his life. "Wow dis is delicious." The elf starts to chew on the lettuce leaves in the salad, the knife resting on his shoulder.

"It's not that glamorous." The elf looks up at me.

"What d'you mean?" He says with a piece of tomato hanging just out of his mouth.

"It's just a couple of vegetables cut up with some dressing over it." He happily chews the salad slowly, until all that remains is an empty container.

"I don' know how to make dressin', but . . ." He lets out a wind shattering burp and covers his mouth. "Sorry." I pick him up and replace him on my shoulder.

"I don't know where you live but I'll try to send you a bottle, you know, to say thanks." He smiles wider than his face can hold. He points in the direction to go next and I can't help but to think how I'm going to get dressing to an elf.

We walk for twenty minutes then I hear the familiar sounds of my mates telling their crappy stories, the smell of cooking meat and the sound of opening beers. I step through the forest and in the clearing there are two tents set up, a small barbeque with meat in the centre and a few chairs beside it.

"Hey, you made it."

"Yeah, it wasn't easy to find this place, wouldn't have if it weren't for . . ." I look to my shoulder, the elf is gone, no sign of having occupied that space.

"Weren't for what?"

"Don't worry about it."

It's not until later that night, whilst looking through my bag, that I find the note Richard left for me: *If you want to talk or send me anything just mail it with the flower you found and I'll instantly get it, your friend Richard.*