

Wisp in the Woods

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The near full moon provided just enough light to make out the area directly around Cathal with no other sources of light to help him find his way through the thick wall of oak trees in the dark forest. Cathal knows that he never should have gone into the woods to begin with, after all he had grown up being told to avoid it, to never enter no matter what he heard or saw from within the trees. But he wasn't always the best at listening, so here Cathal was making his way through the trees and bushes trying to find his way out, trying to find his way back to the field this day had started in.

Cathal stumbles over a root hidden by dead leaves and shadow, barely able to keep himself from falling to the dirt floor as Cathal pauses for a moment to try and figure out if he should change direction. He should have left some kind of trail or markers on the oaks to help guide him back to the field surrounding his village, sort of like the shiny white pebbles left by Hansel and Gretel. But there is no point now thinking about what he should have done, the only thing Cathal should be thinking about is how to get out of this cursed forest before anything worse than stumbling over roots happens. Not that anything is going to happen Cathal thinks to himself, trying to keep the stories he had been told out of his head while deciding to head in the direction he had been traveling.

The moon is still in the sky, light just barely able to get through the thick canopy of trees as Cathal still toys to find his way through the maze of trees, using one hand to feel for marks in the trunks of the oak trees. The other hand carries the somewhat pointed stone he has been using to make the marks he is feeling for to try and keep track of where he has been, but rocks are not

the best for cutting into the tough bark of these twisted trees, and Cathal is trying not to do too much damage too the tree trunks. The wind moving through the oaks and shaking branches as it passes is the only noise Cathal has heard in the time he's been in the forest after the sun went down, but it was far from comforting. This is the forest, the dark forbidden forest, and there are animals that live here that are said to tear apart anything they come across that isn't like them. Cathal pushes forward and while searching the trunk of the nearest tree for a mark, something hooks around an ankle knocking Cathal down with a partially muffled scream of surprise.

Now laying on the dirt staring up at the bit of sky and moon that can be seen through the thick layers of branches and leaves Cathal tries to steady his breathing and holds back his tears, refusing to let himself cry. Crying doesn't help, it never helps. Only babies cry. All it would do is mark him as weak, and in this terrifying place Cathal can't risk being marked as weak by whatever animals and creatures were no doubt hidden among the tall oaks and large rocks surrounding him. The ground if surprisingly comfortable, the dirt not hard packed and by some blessing there had been no rocks in the spot Cathal fell saving him from more than just a few scrapes and maybe a bump from the fall.

The snapping of a twig somewhere near him has Cathal sitting up instantly in fear, leaves falling from his hair and eyes wide, looking around trying to see through the dense trees with the limited moonlight, but the shadows are too thick. Swallowing up everything around him and once again Cathal is fighting to hold back tears as he works to keep his breathing somewhat steady while trying to get to his feet carefully. Moving as slowly as he can, Cathal now stands on his feet looking around and listening intently, trying to hear something, anything, that would tell him what direction not to go in, while the pointed rock is still clutched tightly in his hand. While

falling, Cathal had managed to hold onto the rock that had been providing the only bit of hope he had of getting out of the dark forest, and he wasn't about to let go of it now no matter what was closing in on him.

Another twig snapping off to Cathal's right has him quickly turning that way, taking a few small steps back and trying once more to see through the shadows threatening to swallow him along with everything else inside the forest. The rock is clutched tightly in a white knuckled hand held up slightly level with Cathal's chest while the other hand is pressed against the rough trunk of a great oak tree directly behind him. The wind isn't blowing anymore, like the world is holding its breath along with Cathal who is standing up straight to his full meager height, chin up and head held high despite the terror clear on his face, and the deep sadness in his eyes. A slight rustling of leaves and branches from in front of him and now there are two eyes around three feet off the ground, watching Cathal from the darkness.

Cathal is frozen with his back pressed against the rough and scarred bark of the tree behind him, bark that was scarred by the large, sharp claws of some creature that has made its home inside these forbidden woods. From where the eyes are still watching Cathal there is a clear huffing sound followed by what Cathal assumes is the snapping sound of the creatures teeth stuck in a powerful jaw clashing together in warning. Unable to do anything but stand stock still, tremblingly pressed back against the oak behind him, Cathal watches the eyes unblinking while thinking of all the things he would say in apology if he managed to get out of the dark forest. But there is no time for apologies or prayers as the eyes begin to move closer with the sound of snapping twigs and crumping leaves getting louder as the dark creature the eyes belong to slowly lumbers out of the shadows between the trees.

A bear. It's a bear. A big one, walking along on its four paws, claws dragging through the dirt and leaves with each step as it moves closer and closer to where Cathal is trembling with his rock clutched tight in both hands pressed to his chest. Eyes wide and terrified, Cathal watches the bear as it seems to get impossibly bigger with each step towards him, the sounds of the bear moving across the ground and through the low plants the only thing filling Cathal's ears as he screws his eyes shut. It is close now, right there in front of him with its eyes still fixed on the trembling boy huddled against an old oak tree with a rock held close for comfort, or perhaps it is meant to be for protection. But whichever it was meant for, the rock gets no chance to fully perform its duty. Cathal's eyes peak open as the bear shifts its weight back while rising up onto its hind legs to tower over the small boy at nearly seven feet tall.

The pain Cathal is expecting never comes, there is no sound other than the breathing from the living being in front of him and the wind that has begun to weave through the trees once more, more gently than before. Grip loosening on the rock as his eyes open, Cathal looks to where the bear had been towering in front of him just moments before to see a pair of light blue eyes staring straight at him. A pair of eyes that are set in a very human face, on a very human head, attached to a body that is very certainly human. An unclothed human, but that doesn't change the what of the being, or hide his gender, who is staring right back at Cathal with a curious and confused look on his lightly tanned face.

The naked man's mouth opens and for a moment nothing comes out but a hoarse croaking sound, which causes the man to close his mouth and frown for a moment before trying once more to speak. "You shouldn't be...out here. You are much...much too young to be here. And much too...human." The voice sounds like it hasn't been used in over a decade and despite how

quiet it is in the forest surrounded by the towering twisted oak trees, Cathal finds himself leaning forward just enough to be able to make out the words.

And as soon as the stranger's voice fades away, Cathal stops moving again and simply stares at the man who had seemed to appear out of nowhere, and was very much not dressed in a way Cathal would have expected of someone who seemed to have intended to be out in the forbidden forest after dark. Cathal might be here by accident, but he still has the common sense to be fully clothed with basic shoes protecting his feet from all that could cause injuries or damage hidden among the trees and bushes. Getting cuts to the bottom of the feet could cause a lot of problems since not walking around wasn't an option for Cathal, he wouldn't be able to eat if he wasn't able to move around the village.

"I didn't mean to be here after dark, but I didn't keep track of time as well as I should have so now I'm lost. Did you...did you see the bear? The bear...it was standing right there... right where you are. But there's no bear now, just you, so maybe there wasn't a bear and I'm too scared. I should have known better than to go into the forest." Cathal's voice is quiet and shaking, slightly higher in pitch than what was normal but Cathal wasn't ashamed. He wasn't crying because he wasn't a baby. It's okay to be scared, being scared can be good, it means that you are careful and know things are dangerous, but only babies cry and Cathal wasn't crying.

The man looks at Cathal for a moment before looking up towards the partially hidden moon high above them in the sky, looking down on the world and everything in it. After a moment of staring at the moon and stars, the man looks back down to Cathal who is still pressed against the solid trunk of the tree, but no longer trembling or clutching the rock in his hand so tightly to his chest. Then the man seems to notice that Cathal has his head tilted back at an

uncomfortable angle with his wide grey eyes fixed on the mans face, and appears to realize the distinct lack of anything at all covering his body. Turning around quickly, the man seems to fade back into the shadows the bear had come from, leaving Cathal alone surrounded by the towering oak trees, trying to see into the shadows the man had disappeared into. But before Cathal has the time to think about whether or not to take a step or two forward to try and find the man again, that man seems to just materialize out of nothing. Now though, he is partially covered by some sort of dark colored long blanket or cloak.

“You live in the village surrounded by the large empty field, yes?” The man asks while holding the material close around his body to cover himself slightly, and Cathal just nods, still not ready to leave the safety of the tree at his back and not sure if he would be able to speak. The man doesn’t seem to mind. “I can help you get to where the trees meets the field, but we can’t do it now, it isn’t safe for you to be moving through the forest at night even if I was there to guide you. I have a place you can stay, a place for you to rest if you are willing to trust me, and once the sun is up I will bring you to the edge of the trees so you can get home.”

For a moment Cathal does nothing but watch the man and listen to the wind moving quietly through the trees surrounding him as he keeps his back pressed firmly to the large oak tree. Then Cathal looks the man in the eyes as best he can and just nods once. The man gives a small nod in response before turning around and starting to walk away through the forest, with the small form of Cathal walking quickly to keep up with the larger mans long strides. Unsure how long he has been following behind this man who’s name he doesn’t even know, Cathal is doing his best to carefully mark the oaks he passes with his pointed rock while still keeping up with the tall man.

Ahead through the trees there seems to be a small spot of light that confuses Cathal, as there is no way for it to be the sun and if it were a fire it meant this stranger lived out here in the forest no man was supposed to enter. But as they get closer and closer to the spot of light near five feet off the ground, Cathal suddenly finds himself in a small clearing and directly ahead of him is a sort of makeshift shelter inside the hallowed trunk of a massive tree, with branches adding to its structure. The strange floating light seems to flow and dance, but when Cathal looks straight at it there is no movement and it slowly starts to fade until he looks away once more. Before Cathal can think much more about the strange dancing light floating off to one side of the little shelter, the man draws his attention by calling out to him just loud enough to be heard within the small clearing.

“Come boy, you need to get inside. The longer you are out among the trees unprotected the more risk there is, so please come, you have nothing to fear from me for if I wished you any harm I would not have approached you in the first place and simply watched and waited. Come, there is still some hours before the sun is back in the sky when I'll be able to bring you back to the edge of the field, and you may as well try to get some rest until then.” Cathal watches the man for a moment before giving a small nod and walking closer to the opening of the hallowed tree and stopping just inside before taking one hand off his rock and holding it out awkwardly to the man as his mothers words on manners came to mind.

“Thank you for your help. I'm Cathal.” Cathal is proud he doesn't sound scared.

The man looks at him before carefully taking Cathal's outstretched hand to shake while using his other hand to keep the cloth bunched about his body. “It's good to meet you Cathal, and I'm happy to help. I'm Bar. Come inside, best we get some rest.”

Cathal moves fully inside the hallowed tree and looks around before being directed to a pile of blankets on the floor in one corner at the back of the space, which Cathal walks towards after a moment. When he gets to the pile of blankets Cathal hesitates and looks down at his covered feet then up at Bar who just smiles slightly and waves a hand as if saying not to worry about it. Looking back to the inviting pile, Cathal carefully lays down on top of the blankets while setting his rock on the ground right at the edge of the blankets before looking up to see Bar a short distance away grabbing another blanket while still holding the cloth around his body. When Bar makes his way back to where Cathal is watching him, Cathal moves a little to one side as Bar starts to settle in next to him, carefully throwing the blanket over the boy before moving to the other side of the sleeping space.

At first Cathal does not want to fall asleep right away, no matter how nice and friendly Bar has been to him so far, the man is still a stranger who clearly lives inside the forbidden woods. There is something inside of Cathal that is telling him that he can trust Bar, that the man will not hurt him, but the fear from being lost in the woods and fear of the creatures living within is still there as well. But then as the warmth from the blankets and the heat of Bar laying nearby surround Cathal like the blankets he starts to drift off to sleep, thinking only of how when morning comes and Bar brings him to the field surrounding his village as promised, there is a part of him that does not want to return to the very little that waits for him.

But that does not matter now, it's still night and Cathal does not have to leave yet, so he shifts in the blankets and settles. The last thing that registers before sleep takes him, is how the body of Bar behind him is much larger and warmer than it was moments ago, and that the strong arm resting over him and holding him close has become the arm and paw of a great black bear.