

THE PINES – TRAVIS EVANS

Dim flames from the dying fire, casting small shadows on the makeshift tents of the encampment. Most were sleeping, some taunted by nightmarish thoughts of the hard days ahead and the things they had done just to make it through this one. One day out of what might be thousands just like it. A shadow moved through the tents; their body covered in ragged clothing that hadn't had a proper wash in month and a light travelling pack on their back. They stepped lightly, avoiding twigs that had been strewn across the ground to warn against intruders whether they be human or animal, knowing exactly where to place each light-footed step.

The tree line wasn't far off, looming pines neatly planted in rows by loggers patiently waiting to cut them down for various uses in a previous life. Now they stand tall and will only get taller with no one to disturb their growth.

Almost there, a twig snapped behind them. They turned to face the stalker, his face barely visible through the darkness of night.

A young man with shaggy, dishevelled hair and a few days growth on his chin. "Laura? What are you doing out here this late?" he yawned, still half asleep.

She recognised the voice of her friend without a second thought. "Go back to bed, Tommy. I just needed some air," Laura whispered, trying not to draw any attention from anyone else at the camp.

"Okay, okay," he said through a yawn "jus' be careful if you go near the trees, last town we passed were saying they lost a few people foraging for shrooms."

"Okay... Go back to bed, Tommy. Big day ahead," she found it hard to lie to him, but the darkness of night helped to conceal the sadness on her face.

Tommy stumbled back to the tents, stretching his arms out and looking at the stars which covered the night sky. Without the numerous streetlamps and city lights, they were the most beautiful they had been in centuries.

Laura found herself walking till the sun came up and the campsite was far behind her, assuming someone would at least try to find her once Tommy woke up and noticed that she didn't come back from frolicking in the moonlight. Lying to everyone for so long was a huge burden on her, but especially lying to Tommy. They had had each other's backs since the collapse, the brother she always wanted in her previous life. Despite this, Laura couldn't bear the thought of this life anymore, the thought of living another day in this hellish landscape.

Her father once told her that '*dying is the easy part, living, living is the true struggle of life*'. At the time life was a lot easier, and his words stuck with her now more than they ever did.

'If only the old man had to live through this...'

It had been hours, from what she could see the forest had no end and she didn't want it to. Everything was beautiful. Unravaged by civilisation, the forest floor was overgrown with shrubs, native grass and flowers, some of which she had never seen before in her lifetime. She stumbled upon a small rock with a smooth flat surface and used it as a seat, leaning up against one the pines as a sort of back rest. She stretched out her limbs and took it all in, a rare treat that wasn't taken advantage of enough during her years on the road.

'What would life have been like if this never happened? Boring probably. Just another high school dropout working in hospitality, being under paid and hating my life more than I do now...'

Birds started to sing as the sun rose, and she could see squirrel's scurrying through the underbrush. Their red fur standing out amongst the bright green and browns of nature. Laura hadn't seen one, yet alone two squirrels in the wild before. She knelt clicking her fingers together, whilst tearing a leaf from one the shrubs nearby with the other hand.

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“Come here little guys,” a mix of a whisper and high-pitched baby voice. Still clicking and holding out the leaf towards the furry critter. “I’m not gonna hurt ya, come on, come here.”

The squirrels raised their heads and twitched their little noses. Their ears pricked up, listening to the forest and then they scattered. A deep cracking of trees echoed around her, followed by a monstrous groan. The birds were no longer singing. Everything fell silent. She looked up to the treetops and couldn’t believe her eyes. A set of bright green eyes peered back at her through a mess of tangled hair that resembled tree branches and bark like skin. Its deep groaning breathes had such force they blew the tree branches aside like a strong wind before a storm and left a foul stench of rotting flesh and decay lingering in the air. Laura held back a cough, staying as still as her shivering body would let her.

“tala upp innan jag slipa dina ben med mina tänder?” It bellowed from the treetops in a slow, rhythmic tone the likes of giant horn.

Motionless, gawking in disbelief, heart pounding in time with her short sharp breathes. *‘I’m dreaming! This has to be a dream!’* Laura closed her eyes tight, tighter than she thought was humanly possible and turned around on the spot. “This isn’t real, this cannot be real!” she said out loud to herself.

“Svara mig mänskligt! Tala upp innan jag slipa dina ben med mina tänder!”

She opened her eyes in disbelief and turned to face it. A giant branch of an arm came down upon her, slow like a tree falling after being cut. Laura regained her senses in time to move out of the way as its fingers dug into the earth where she was standing. Each finger was thick and covered in bark just like the rest of the beast that she could see which gave the illusion of a slightly uprooted tree amongst the growth on the forest floor.

Realising how close she just came to being a part of the forest herself, Laura turned and sprinted off into the trees away from the beast.

“Det är ingen idé. Denna plats är min,” the beast bellowed as it brought up a giant stump-like leg that blended in with the surroundings and stomped down. It was like a small earthquake. The trees shook and the ground trembled. Laura found it hard to keep her balance, but she maintained her pace out of fear.

The forest was like a maze, unpredictable and dangerous. Leaping over fallen trees and ducking under low hanging branches, she kept running, running until the deep groaning and cracking of trees were distant. Until she could hear the birds singing again.

There was no telling how much deeper Laura had ran into the forest, every tree looked the same and she could barely make out the position of the sun through the thick branches. She hadn’t planned on leaving this place once she got deep enough to know no one would find her, but now it’s all she wanted. This was the first time in her life that she was truly afraid of dying.

She tripped over a rogue branch and fell into a small creek that the underbrush would have hidden if she hadn’t tumbled. Landing on her elbow, the pain was so immense it took all her strength not to yell out for help. Not to yell for her long dead mother.

‘What a stupid thought.’

A thirst to be quenched, Laura propped herself up on both knees and scooped the water into her gaping mouth. It was the best water she could ever remember tasting. Fresh, untampered, clean, water. She splashed a bit on her face, washing away the dirt that caked it for days... maybe even weeks now. A moment of respite amongst the chaos.

She carried on, further into the depths of the forest. A clearing amongst the trees. A perfect circle with small rocks creating a border on the inside of the tree line, with four spaced evenly apart converging on small pillar placed perfectly in the middle of the clearing. Laura looked at the sky, the sun was finally in full view and the birds were still singing around her. She determined the pattern on the ground was some sort of compass as the sun

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was setting to the west in the direction of one of the points. Unfortunately, this didn't help her figure out where she came from, or where she was headed.

'This is what you wanted, Laura. You wanted to be lost, you wanted to fade away in the forest.'

She made her way across the clearing, towards the western sun. The birds had stopped singing and a shiver ran up her spine.

'Is somebody watching me?'

"Laura!" a voice yelled through trees, echoing around the clearing.

She recognised the voice, it was Tommy. His hair pulled back into a ponytail, his ragged clothes covered in dirt and Laura's old bow in hand. A look of shock on Laura's face, unable to perceive if this was real or if she truly was dreaming. "Tommy? Is that really you? How did you find me?"

A puzzled look on his face, Tommy put the bow over his shoulder, "what do you mean 'is it really you?', of course it's me you asshole. You think anyone would else would follow you into this god forsaken –"

Before he could finish, thick tree roots entangled his body and violently dragged him back through the forest and out of sight.

"TOMMY?!" Laura screamed, before she could run after him, she heard the tree creaking and the loud groaning breaths of the beast.

"DET HÄR ÄR MIN SKOG, YNKLIIG MÄNNISKA!" the horn-like tone echoed through the forest. It was so loud Laura squeezed her ears tightly with both hands, it felt like something was squeezing her skull.

The trees parted, an invisible force pushing them away from each other to make a path. For the first time she saw the whole beast, stomping between the giant trees equal to its height, Tommy's limp body clutched in on hand and a crude wooden club in the other.

Animal pelts roughly sewn together hung from one shoulder and covered half its torso and groin. Its skin was like that of an old tree, hard bark with intricate patterns and runes carved all over, a few rogue branches hanging off of its torso and arms. The hands and feet were almost humanoid apart from the thick branch like fingers and toes that looked longer than they should be in proportion to its body.

Laura was in complete awe of the beast as she finally realised what had pursued her through the forest, *a Giant!*

She couldn't move, her limbs themselves felt like they were rooted to the ground. Her breathes were heavy and her heart was beating so fast it could have broken through the ribs at any moment.

"Där är du människa!" the Giant tossed Tommy's body against a tree. What was a simple flick of the wrist had such force that every bone in Tommy's body could be heard breaking as he hit the old pine tree. If he wasn't dead before, he was now.

Aggressive squawking of birds, thousands of them in unison all around them. The giant loomed over her, its bright green eyes like giant orbs amongst the mess of branches covering its face. She felt a sense of calming as she stared into them.

"Du aldrig kommer att lämna denna plats."

You will never leave this place.

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