

## Way Out

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The ancient forest was tired. It had existed since the beginning of time. It didn't want to capture any more poor souls, but it didn't have a choice.

When it had still been a young forest, all the creatures of light and of darkness had gathered in it to be amongst themselves. One day, they had cursed it because they were bored and didn't feel it was "special" enough to be one of them. That is, the evil ones among them had cast the curse; the good ones had just been too peaceful to stop their opponents.

Only one little girl, part human, part fairy, who loved the forest dearly, dared to stand up to them, but they threw stones at her and chased her from the forest. Then, they cursed the forest to henceforth live off the energy of captured souls.

Since that time, whenever it had felt itself weakening, the forest had been forced to move on top of a village for a few seconds at a time. There, it consumed the souls of the villagers before returning to its customary spot. The villagers' dead bodies were left behind, their souls damned to wander the dark forest until the end of time. It was always dark inside the forest, no matter the time of day. In the gloomy twilight, whenever one looked up at the ghostly firs, one saw only the night sky above them. Stars and moon stood unmoving over the cursed forest, as much prisoners as their friend down below.

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The old woman pulled her moth-eaten cape tighter around her narrow shoulders, fearfully embarking on her journey into the dangerous, dark forest looming only a short distance from her front door. All her life she had been watching and fearing the forest. She had never gotten too close, even though her grandmother had told her about its secrets - or maybe because of that. Nervously, she stepped outside her front door, eyes fixed on the great, dark forest in front of her.

She knew that hers was a perilous mission. She never would have imagined finding herself about to walk into the constantly growing forest. Back when she had been a little girl, the forest's edge hadn't been so close to the house, but somehow it seemed to constantly expand, and soon it had reached the edges of the small mountain village. She had also witnessed the ground starting to shake and the forest disappearing, only to reappear seconds later. In the interim, all that was visible to the eye was a vast, empty expanse. It seemed like a hallucination, but every time it was followed by eerie sounds and terrible cries coming out of the forest. When that happened, the villagers would make the sign of the cross and pray. They avoided the forest and tried to stop any traveller from entering it, not always successfully. But the area was remote and it was rare that travellers would get lost in the forest - rarer still that they would find a way out again and tell of scary things.

Nobody could say whom the forest would keep and whom it would let go. Only the forest knew - and the old woman. Her grandmother had told her on her deathbed that they were descendants of a special line that still had fairy blood in them. Less in every generation, but still some. She had also told her about the curse on the forest and of their brave ancestor who had been chased from the forest before the curse was cast.

It was due to this heritage that the members of their family were able to leave the forest alive, even the ones who didn't know the story. However, it was only the forest itself that wouldn't harm them, out of respect for its friend, the fairy-human, whom it had never forgotten. The creatures haunting the forest, though, were desperate and mad because they couldn't escape their prison. Thus, the forest harbored dangers from which even the heirs of that line weren't safe.

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The old woman had no choice but to enter the forest. Her beloved husband lay dying and she wouldn't and couldn't let him go. The only chance to relieve his pain and cure him was to find the healing blue moss in the forest and bring it back to him. If her grandmother had been right, the forest wouldn't harm her. All she could do was pray that she would find the moss quickly, so she would have to spend as little time as possible inside the forest with its many dangers.

Sighing, but walking as fast as her old bones would let her, she headed towards the forest. She just wanted to get it over with. Muttering prayers, she embarked on her dangerous mission. Fifteen minutes later, she had disappeared inside the darkness of the forest.

The forest had been preparing to capture more souls when it was startled. Very faintly, it smelled something familiar, but it wasn't sure what. Then it saw the old woman, nervously hurrying from tree to tree, looking for the blue moss, not knowing that she was being watched by stem stranglers and root runts. Even though her features looked different from age, and the formerly thick, golden fairy hair had become thin and silvery, the forest knew that this was an heir of its fairy-human. It could smell it in her blood. It was watching her through its trees, sharpening its senses to know what the forest creatures were going to do to her. They were still lying in wait but they were getting ready to attack. They seemed to be able to sense the old woman's unusual aura.

The forest sensed the rising tension. To help the old woman, it got ready to jump and capture new souls - the tremors preceding a jump always drove all the creatures into hiding. They never knew who the forest was going to capture and preferred watching from a safe distance at first. The old woman felt the tremors, too, and looked for the blue moss with renewed urgency, her heart racing with fear. The creatures withdrew. The forest jumped onto a new village, enveloping the houses for a few seconds before jumping back to its old spot. The forest was filled with new souls. The village was left behind dead and empty.

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The young traveller who was slowly trudging through the forest noticed the tremors as well, even if he didn't know what they signalled. He had been looking for a way out of the forest for so long that he feared he'd never find it. Every time the forest trembled, as it had done several times, an eerie silence followed. Only afterward would he meet other people again, strange people who would glance at him nervously and who were also looking for a way out -- or were beyond that. Some seemed to have given up and resigned themselves to their fate. They had built small huts and lean-tos, and every so often he would come across village-like clusters of dwellings. He didn't want to give up, though. Even less so after a stem strangler had attacked him from high up in the tall firs and had injured him badly. Frozen in terror, he had seen the beast leaping down onto him. He

owed his survival to his youth and his reflexes. If one could call it survival -- after all, he was already dead and it was his soul that was roaming the forest. In a fierce battle, he had managed to overwhelm the furry beast that looked to be part bat, part monkey, with teeth like a shark. The incident had made him even more watchful than before. It had also made the other stem stranglers grow wary of him and begin keeping their distance. He was an opponent they weren't keen on engaging; there were others who were easier prey.

The young man had lost any sense of time. All he wanted was to escape from the forest that seemed to him like a giant grave. He didn't know it, but he had been searching for a way out of his dark prison for nigh on ten years, even though many of the other captives had told him that nobody could ever escape the forest. Anyone who had ever tried had perished in the attempt. But still he wouldn't give up.

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Right before the tremors started, he had caught sight of an old woman with long, silvery hair who seemed to be frantically looking for something. In the forest, one could never be sure if someone was friend or foe, so he stopped in his tracks and watched her from afar. He saw her almost panic when the tremors started. He also saw the two stem stranglers lurking above her, ready to attack, but as the trembling got stronger, they withdrew into their nest in the tree tops. The woman seemed to have found what she was looking for; he could see her stuffing something into a small pouch she had tied to her waist. She waited out the tremors anxiously crouching on the ground, while the traveller held on to a blood fir whose sap stained his palms red.

When the tremors stopped, the woman rose quickly and hurried off, not even stopping to straighten her clothes. The traveller stared after her. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing. Maybe this old woman knew the way out of this hell? He ran after her, careful not to startle her and to stay unnoticed - after all, he could be wrong about her and she could be his undoing.

Suddenly, the woman was gone. He was angry at himself. He should have followed her more closely. The darkness wasn't helping. But while he was looking around himself, he suddenly saw a light. A way out! His broken-down body straightened, all his senses focused on leaving this lightless grave as quickly as possible. As fast as he could, he wal-

ked towards the light that was steadily growing bigger. He tried to stay calm, telling himself that it could all be a cruel joke constructed by this evil, tree-filled dungeon; that it was just waiting to mock him for his vain hopes and would only lead him into even darker corners of its perverse interior.

But then he could see the actual edge of the forest and, beyond that, the light of a bright afternoon. He was stunned, but he was able to make out a figure in the light-filled distance. It was the old woman, quickly moving away from the forest. His heart rejoiced. He had found the way out. As fast as he could, he ran after her.

The woman was old, but the fairy blood running through her veins alerted her to danger. Someone was following her! But she knew that nobody could escape the forest, even if she didn't know how the forest kept them in. She hurried out of the forest and didn't stop until she was a safe distance away. She stopped, breathing heavily, and turned around to look at her pursuer. She saw a young man who was calling after her desperately. She wondered if he would be able to leave the forest like she had but thought it was unlikely; something would probably happen to him. She felt sorry for the young man, so she waved her thin arms and called out, "Turn back! Don't go any further!"

The young man had always heard that nobody could leave the forest, yet someone just had. "How did you do that?" he called out to the woman. "How did you do it?" But the woman didn't seem to hear him. Indeed, it seemed as if she was trying to make him turn around and stay inside his prison. He would never do that. He had reached the last tree -- only one more step and he would be free. Since nothing had happened so far, he risked taking that last step, but was stopped cold.

He stood frozen, as if rooted to the ground, and felt a strange heaviness creeping up his legs. When he looked down, he saw with horror that he was turning into a tree. Desperate, with tears in his eyes, he called out to the woman one last time, „How did YOU do it? My God, how did you do it?“ Seconds later, the transformation was complete. Only a few traces of sap were left to tell of the last tears he had ever wept.

The old woman looked on in horror as the forest had revealed its last secret to her. Crying and helpless, she watched the young man turn into a tree. Now she knew why the forest had steadily gotten bigger. But there was nothing left for her to do. With a heavy heart, she turned away, going home to bring her husband the blue moss.

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