

The Forest

by Dancin' Beaver

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I don't remember when I first started hearing the voice. I do remember that it woke me up from the middle of a nightmare one cold, stormy night. I was dreaming that I was being chased by a huge, red hand, that kept getting closer and closer as I ran from it, and at the moment it grabbed me I bolted upright in bed with the voice running in my head.

"Go to the forest! Go to the forest!"

It had been faint that first time. I had ignored it, put it away in my mind as a result of staying up too late or working too hard. I didn't think it would happen again. Each time it happened I would think nothing of it and assume it would go away. But it did keep happening, sporadically at first. It eventually settled in every night.

It got louder, too. After about twenty times it was about as bold as a man speaking to a crowd. By the fiftieth time it was as if it was yelling in my ear, and beyond the seventieth time it brought grandiose headaches to me as I awoke every night, my head throbbing and the voice ringing in my ears.

"Go to the forest! Go to the forest and find yourself!"

I didn't want to go to the forest. I had heard horrible tales of the forest, what happened inside, what happened to those who went in. Outsiders would look at those who had been there, see their mark of trespassing on those mystical grounds, and shy away from them, rejecting them from society. They were outcasts, loved only by the others who were destined to happen along their source of misery themselves, or so I had heard. I had been taught at an early age to hate them, to shun them, to curse them, to bring pain to them. I was told that if I did not, I would become as them, and I was told I didn't want that. They were called savages, and the forest was their only refuge, for their enemies would not go in and take their mark.

My views of them had been dramatically altered when I happened to cross paths with a friend of mine. He was fighting one of them, slashing at him with a knife as the helpless victim lay there, bleeding and sobbing, too weakened to scream. I heard my friend yell obscenities as he set his weapon upon the unfortunate man, unfortunate for many reasons stemming from a single visit to a single place.

I was no fool. I knew a murder when I saw one, and I rushed to my friend, begging him to stop. He turned to face me, with a look of puzzlement on his face which quickly turned to hatred as he spat his bitter prejudices at me. "You idiot! I should do away with you, too,

to keep you from going there someday! You're destined for a life as one of them!" With that, he went off, leaving the dying man to waste away on the side of the road. I never tended to his wounds, knowing what kind of a social status that would give me.

The bleeding man haunted my dreams for weeks, and I couldn't tell anyone for fear of being cast out of my social circles. Finally I was able to sleep soundly again with the aid of an herbal concoction one of the town elders recommended. I never told him of the dream that gave me reason to need the potion, and he never asked, nor did the local apothecary as he mixed it according to his big book, making a bottle for me once a week. The draught didn't help when I started dreaming about the hand and waking up to the voice, however, and so I stopped buying it, which made the dying man return in my dreams again. Sometimes it would be his slashed hand that was chasing me.

It may have been my friend's words that made me sell my house and belongings, or it may have been the voice which brought ringing pains to my ears every night, or it may have been the unbearable nightmares that made me dread my soft, fluffy pillow when it came time to use it. I sold all I owned, save for a staff, the clothes on my back, and a cloak for the weather, and left the town which would soon come to hate me with all the fury that was ingrained into its very fibers.

The closer I drew to the forest, the more forest-folk there seemed to be. There seemed to be no end to them. I observed them, seeing how they treated each other, noting their actions towards each other. They didn't seem especially horrid or savage, as I had been taught to believe, and it seemed that just by looking at me they could see that I was no man to harm them, and they became downright friendly and offered me food, drink, and games to pass the time. I grew to like them more and more, in an amicable yet grim way, for I knew I was to be one of them soon.

I eventually reached the outskirts of the forest, viewing it with mixed feelings of fear, doubt, and a strange longing to be there which had not been there before. The dreams and the voice had stopped by then, and I had been glad to be rid of them, glad to have reached my destination, and yet too scared to enter and too worried about my future. I spent that night at the outskirts of the forest, and the dream came back to haunt me. I awoke with the voice in my head, louder than ever, leaving a dull thudding in my ears. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, and I got up, picked an apple off a nearby tree for breakfast, and set off to the forest, discarding the core just before I reached the first trees.

The closer I walked towards the wood, the warmer my skin felt. As I stepped under the outermost branches, my skin burned as if I was on fire. Then, as I stepped in farther, the heat went away and I suddenly saw the mark of the forest-folk as it appeared, first on my hands, then my feet, then on my face. I underwent the transformation with no immediate pain or discomfort, as I had expected from of the propaganda I had been fed as a youth. It initially filled me with a sense of panic.

As I stood there examining myself, I suddenly heard a rustle, and a man stepped out from behind a tree. He was slightly beyond the prime of his youth, and was wearing only a

short pair of breeches on his waist and a look of spite on his face. He had the mark on his chest as well as on his hands, feet, and face, but his mark was twisted, dark, and black as it spread across his body. Across his face he had a great scar that went from his brow to his cheek, and across his chest he had three parallel scars that looked as though they had been delivered by the claws of a great and terrible beast.

"Why are you here?" He asked his question with an air of accusation.

"I am looking for someone."

"Who do you seek so badly that you have taken the mark for their sake?"

"I- I seek myself."

He was initially taken aback by this statement. "Another one claims to seek himself? You must be crazy! The only thing of yourself you will find in this place is a new form to be loathed and scorned! It was this forest that brought this accursed mark to me, and now people come for it willingly! You are a fool!"

I replied to him, saying "Had you known what has happened to me you would not say so." And I told him of the voice and the dream and the dying man, and how it had become unbearable to stay away from the place any longer. He looked at me through my tale with a silent contempt. When I had finished, he replied with an even more hateful tone.

"So you have come here because of bad dreams and voices in your head? You are mad! Superstitious!" He paused and glared at me. "Well, you have taken the mark. Now you shall die with it." With those words, he went away.

I was now left alone, and I decided to walk deeper into the forest. I soon came along an older man. He, too had scars; there was one on his cheek and one across his left hand. He had the mark on his face, hands, and feet, like the rest of his kind, and though his marks were faded with age, they were still there -- unmistakable and unremovable. He looked at me curiously for a moment and then smiled wide.

"Ahh, I don't recognize you. You must be a newcomer here."

"Yes, good sir, that is correct."

"Why have you come here?"

"I have come seeking myself."

"Oh? It seems that many have been seeking themselves lately, and they all end up here."

"Do you know why, good sir?"

"I do not. But I do know that those who come here were predestined for it, whether they know it or not."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Why, the mark is on all who are destined for this form from the day of their birth! You might not have known, but it was on you as you walked the streets of your town. Only those with the visible mark can see the invisible, but it is there nonetheless."

I was struck speechless. I started to wonder whether any of my old friends or relatives unknowingly had the mark, and whether I would see them again without them loathing the first sight of me.

The old man picked up the conversation again. "This forest is large, and there are many villages in it. If you continue in that direction --" (he pointed towards a lighter area in the forest) "-- you will come to one. Good day to you." And he left me.

I walked towards the village the old man had pointed out. As I approached it, I could hear sounds emanating from its direction; faint strands of conversation mingled in the air with laughter as I neared my first destination. As I entered the town I felt a great burden lifted off my spirit, and I smiled as I realized I had finally found my home. I settled in that village and built and furnished a home for myself, with the help and charity of some kind forest-folk. I was happy there -- until the voice started again.

The dreams were different this time, and not so horrific; instead of a hand chasing me, I was the hand, chasing after others. Every time I caught someone, I would wake up with the voice in my ears. It started out quietly again, but it grew louder each night until I could bear it no longer.

"Go back! Go back!"

Go back? I could not go back! I would be rejected, slandered, maybe even murdered!

"Go back! Go back! Go back to the town of your birth!"

The voice haunted me for a long while before I told someone about it. I asked one of the village elders what it could mean, and he pondered it for a while before replying.

"You must go back and find others with the mark. Testify to them and lead them to this forest."

I initially did not want to leave this joyful place. But the voice became unbearable, even painful to my ears as I woke up with a ringing, pulsating headache every night. So I left the village, taking again my clothes, cloak, and staff, and took my leave of the forest.

I returned to my hometown, bearing the once-shameful form of a forest-man this time. As I walked its streets, people I once knew deliberately stayed away from me, not even recognizing me as their old acquaintance. I saw many people I had played with as a child, people who had sold me food or other goods, and people who used to sing with me in the tavern odd nights. None of them would frolic with me, sell me provisions, or sing with me now. I fortunately did not run into any real trouble that day, and I left the town to sleep in its outskirts. The voice and dream were gone.

The next day I entered the town again. I searched and searched, looking for those with the mark they could not see. I found none. I did, however, run into my old friend, the one who had threatened to do me in months before. I called him by his name, and he looked at me with shock. Shock soon turned to blind rage, though, and out came his knife as he lunged at me, slashing my clothes and scarring my body as he shouted profuse obscenities at me, not even knowing who I was. I longed to defend myself, to strike the knife from his hand, but I was powerless to do so, unable to raise my staff or ball my fists. I could only cry "Please! Spare me, old friend!"

My cries only made his rage greater, and he slashed at me furiously, bringing unbearable pain to my body and soul. I could no longer stand, and I collapsed onto the road, battered and bleeding. I had no more strength to cry out or howl in pain, and I lay there, silent, as he dug his knife in deeper. He finally stopped, leaving me for dead in the gutter and going about the rest of his day's business.

I could not move from that spot as my life flowed out of me and into the gutter. I could only turn my head and look up a little.

And there, on the side of the road, looking at me, was a young man with a mark he could not see.