

Of Tales and Trees

"A story?" grumbled Wade. "Oh, I don't know..."

He scratched his head as if perplexed and a few of the other men laughed. It was fall in Oregon, near the end of the lumber season, and everyone still in the mess so late had been working the camp since summer. All of them had been there long enough to know that if there was anything Wade Ashford had in ample supply, it was stories.

He was the oldest in camp by at least a decade. What little of his hair was left was stark white, and he had the start of the stoop older men seem to get as the grave starts pulling them down. On first sight, you might be forgiven for thinking such an old man had no place left in the lumber trade, but his arms were still ripcord strong. His voice wasn't old, either--it rang out across the hall with a dark and gravelly tone, filling the space in a way that killed other conversations in their stride.

"All right," he finally said, shaking his head as a few men whooped. "None of that, now. A proper story requires quiet, and attention, or else I'm not wasting my breath."

A quick glance around the mess showed that everyone was listening, relationship between storyteller and audience established. The sun had gone down an hour ago, and most of the lumberjacks were sleeping off a hard shift and readying themselves for the morning. The only ones who had stayed up in the mess, passing around the bottle of contraband whiskey, were night owls. Men who were off by a half-step off their axis. Tony Ramirez was at the table next to Wade, grinning in anticipation of the old man's story--or maybe from the buzz of the blunts he smoked as soon as any shift was over. The Markovs had their own table as always, two burly brothers with dark beards and faces so alike that no one bothered remembering their first names. No one was sure how well they spoke English, but both of them were focused on the old man.

Sammy Lincoln was at the table next to Wade's, legs splayed out across the bench and arms crossed behind his head. He had brought the whiskey, and he'd called for the story--he was the sort of man who felt the need to fill any silence, and would bribe, cajole, and beg in any attempt to ward off the end of the night. On the other side of his table sat Clay. He was a quiet one, offering no explanation whether he was joining in drinks or vanishing from camp for days on end. Quiet, but not like the Markovs or any of the others in camp who didn't speak

English--when pressed, he spoke well, if softly. He seemed content to sit back and watch most nights, taking sips from his drink but never filling it a second time.

Wade didn't seem to mind, and neither did anyone else. The season was nearing its end, and soon the camp would close until the snow passed and the weather warmed enough for work to begin again. Impending joblessness aside, it had been a rough season. Not for injuries--sure, there had been a few accidents, but none of the loss of life or limb that filled any career lumberjack's bad dreams. This year it was the workers who had simply *gone*. Vanished from the camp without a trace. Every year there were desertions, men who found the work not to their liking or who had something to run from. But never so many, and with so little explanation. Tension had settled over the camp, and there were few better relief valves than nights like this.

"Once upon a time," said Wade, a twinkle in his eye, "There was a child who lived in the woods."

Tony laughed.

"What's this, old timer? A fairy tale?" He shook his head. "We about to hear some gingerbread house shit?"

"Hope not," drawled Sammy. "Gingerbread houses, gotta hurt the lumber trade."

He and Tony laughed, and the brothers muttered to each other. Clay was silent, watching.

"If you'll hold your horses, I'll get to it," said Wade cantankerously. "No gingerbread houses in this one, I promise." When the rebellion had ceased, he began again.

"This child, a little boy, lived with his father and older siblings in the woods. Life was hard. The crops didn't grow, there wasn't enough game, and the winters were long. One year, the father counted their provisions and knew there weren't enough to last the winter. Choices had to be made."

Wade paused, downing his whiskey like water. He held the pause a breath longer, daring them to heckle him again, but nothing. The shadows had grown long, and the mess hall--sized for a hundred men--felt cavernously empty and dark with just the few of them to fill it. Smiling to himself, he continued.

"The choice was hard, but obvious. The man's oldest son was working the farm and helping him hunt--he was too valuable to lose. His middle child, his daughter, was the light of his life. He hoped to see her married one day, and out of his forest. But his youngest? Our boy? He was too weak to work the field, too young to hunt. He was only a mouth to feed. So, on the day of the first snow, the man took the boy out into the depths of the forest, where the trees grew so tall and so thick that you couldn't tell if there was still a sky above them. Now, the father wasn't a cruel man--"

"Bullshit," muttered Sammy. He had straightened up from his recline and was listening to the story with a half frown. "Hell of a thing to do to a kid."

"Different times," shrugged Wade, incorporating the interruption. "Wasn't a grocery store you could run to, or welfare checks. Just you and the woods. Well, maybe not so different." He gave a grim smile, and the only man who returned it was Clay, though no one but Wade would have seen it. "Still, the father wasn't cruel--or didn't think of himself that way. Instead of telling the boy he was going to die, he spun a story. Told the boy that winter was coming, and he needed to start pulling his weight. The boy couldn't come home until he was able to get food for the family. Then the father left him in the woods, with the sun setting and the snow starting to fall."

The wind picked up outside, and one of the Markovs actually jumped. His brother barked in laughter, and the tension was cut as the others joined in. Wade smiled too, and waited for the laughter to die down--and as he waited, he saw that Clay had never broken eye contact with him. The quiet man simply stared, waiting for the story to continue.

"The boy didn't know what to do. He had no knife, no bow. He didn't know *how* to hunt. Even if he did, and managed to kill something, he didn't know how to get home. He wanted to sit and cry, but the sun was coming down and the boy knew that the only thing worse than being lost in the woods was being lost in the woods at night. He had to do something, so he started walking. It wasn't long before he heard something walking behind him!"

Tony gave a ghostlike wail, but no one laughed. Wade didn't miss a step.

"Whatever was walking behind him didn't sound like a man, and it didn't sound like a beast, so it could only be a monster. The boy started to walk faster, and the monster behind him kept pace. As the night grew darker, the monster got closer. First, it got so dark that the boy couldn't see where he was going. Still, he kept walking. Then, it got so dark that he couldn't see where he'd been. He kept walking. What else was there to do? It got even darker--so dark that the boy couldn't see where, or who, he was."

"*Who* he was?" asked Sammy.

"Dark like you've never seen," said Wade. "Dark like you can't even imagine--can't see the hand in front of your face, or even inside yourself. The steps had drawn close to the boy, so close they sounded like his own. And maybe they were! Who knows? All that the boy knew was that he had to keep walking."

Wade paused. The silence stretched on and on, with none of the other men daring to break it. It was Clay, seated the furthest away, whose quiet voice rang out in the shadows of the mess hall.

"What happened then?" It almost sounded rote, like Clay already knew the answer.

"When the sun came up, the boy walked out of the woods. He was carrying a slab of meat as big as he was over his shoulders, and his father welcomed him back with open arms. There was finally enough food for the winter."

"And they all lived happily ever after in their gingerbread-fucking-house," muttered Sammy, and this time the laugh spread around the room. The tension of the story was broken, and the bottle of whiskey was empty.

Later, the men filed out of the mess hall and began to make their way back towards their tents. Wade wasn't surprised to find Clay waiting for him. The two of them were the last to leave. The Markovs were supporting the staggering Tony between them, while Sammy had wandered the other way to piss behind a tree. Wade put his hands in his pockets and waited.

"You didn't finish the story," Clay said.

"Thought I did," said Wade. "The others seemed happy."

"That's not how it ends, though."

"No. It's not." Wade smiled, and showed teeth. "The boy came out of the woods in the morning--but he'd been so lost in the dark, so terribly lost. He'd forgotten if he was a boy who killed a monster, or a monster who had eaten a boy. He wasn't sure if there was even a difference."

"And then?" Clay said.

"He went back to his father, like I said. There was plenty of food for the winter, because whatever it was that came out of the woods was only sure of one thing--how to eat."

A silence stretched out between the two men--the two figures, standing there in the darkness at the edge of the woods. The light coming from the tents flickered off their skin, and the shadows that danced on the edges of the trees were long and sharp.

"I thought it was only me," said Clay quietly. "I was the only one."

"Not at all," said Wade with another wide smile. "There's more of us than you'd think."

The two of them set off together. They walked away from the tents and into the woods, in the direction of Sammy--towards him and towards the trees, towering and dark, ready to swallow the world whole.