

The rise of the sun signified the arrival of a new day. Head turned on the pillow, the scent of freshly sun-dried fabric filled the nostrils. Beams of light shone between leaves, casting a mix of glare and shadow on the face, warm but not blinding. The usual noise of morning rush hour traffic was absent, replaced by the chirping of birds and the running river in the distance. The calm ambience of nature, more soothing than any songs and mattresses.

*Birds? River? Nature?*

Grace bounced up from the bed—trees, in front, on the left, to the right, behind the headboard. Last she checked, her bedroom didn't look like this.

Wind fluttered the forest, rustling the trees. Birds perched on branches and sang to each other. The organic scent of damp earth.

She hadn't had such a vivid dream in a while, if ever.

Did she want to go camping? Was that what her brain tried to tell her? She'd need to look up a dream reading website later, if she hadn't forgotten about it by then.

She had never been particularly interested in camping—or anything outdoor for that matter. Though this wasn't that bad, lying in the warm, calming sea of green, doing nothing. And there were no mosquitoes. She thought as she lay on the cheap mattress...*couldn't the bed in the dream be better?* Financial status carried between the waking and dreaming world, as it appeared

As warm and comfortable as the irradiation was, it'd build up. The dark sheets did well to absorb the heat, the same color she picked to 'prolong' their cleanliness between washes.

The sun rose higher, her hair stuck to her face and forehead, and the business casual she fell asleep in last night grew increasingly cramped.

She imagined a room, air-conditioned, with cold dry air blowing toward her, and a tub of ice cream. Nothing happened. She had never been a lucid dreamer. In no other dream had she experienced this vividness, almost like it wasn't a dream.

*Unless...*

She shook her head. To even entertain such unscientific notions would be idiotic.

How else did she suddenly wake up in a forest? That she—along with her bed—got teleported to the middle of nowhere while in her sleep? It's a dream. She laughed to herself, turning to lie on her side. Her phone rested on the same bed as her, beside the pillow, screen facing the bed, still connected to the charging cable. The cable was severed, the insides exposed. Jacket, insulation, copper wires, all cut clean at once.

What a weird dream.

Her eyes closed, but no matter how forceful, how many times they reopened. The forest scenery never changed. The pillows folded to cover her head, but it could not block out the heartbeats in the ears.

The heat exceeded her tolerance. She got out of bed. It would be such a waste to not explore such a vivid dream. The soft mix of grass and dirt she stood on, soaking the socks. Leaf spots on the plants, uneven holes that spelled the presence of insects. Birds she couldn't name with symmetrical patterns on their feathers.

Turning back one last time, she stared at the bed, besides the pillow and short, fallen strands of brown. She grabbed the phone. Just a habit, it'd feel strange without something in her pocket. It's not like she would need it—it's a dream after all.

She walked through the trees, into the trees, past the trees, and ended up at the tree. She's certain she had been walking in the same direction. And the little hill of twigs and fallen leaves she made never showed up again, nor did the bed.

Roaming endlessly fit in a dream, but the consequences didn't. Sweat drenched the back of her shirt, the weight of each step grew, and intervals between breaths shortened.

*Should dreams be this tiring?*

The lack of shoes added to that; the shoes she kicked off before falling asleep last night. The fatigued ankles had almost sprained on several occasions.

Every moment underscored the realness of the surroundings. A single element upheld the notion of the otherwise.

There were no bugs—the biggest reason for her distaste of nature. Obviously, her brain wouldn't compose something she hated. Though why an air conditioner or a pair of running shoes hadn't fallen out of the sky yet was a different question.

She stopped at a river, one that she had used the sound of as a bearing. The water ran downhill, clear enough that she could see the pebbles at the bottom. *Running means it's safe to drink, right?* She thought. The big glass of water in her regular morning routine wasn't available. *Not like it matters...it's a dream.*

She reached in for a handful. Still clear, nothing murky or wiggly. A tentative sip, and her eyebrows furrow. Not that it tasted heinous, but rather, sweet. Sips turned into gulps, one scooping hand turned into two. She splashed her face, rolled up the legs of her pants, discarded the dirtied socks, and dipped her calves below the water. She'd jump in too if she had a change of clothes.

Hydrated and partially washed, the wandering resumed.

The previously exhausted calves no longer burned, the faint ache in the ankles disappeared. Even hunger subsided, if only a little.

Reinvigorated, she could walk for another hour. But she wouldn't have the opportunity to do so.

A growl, bestial, guttural. She paused, looking back along the river.

Grey, unkempt fur. Slanted eyes. Bared fangs. The four-legged source of the noise stared into her, ears pointed upward. It looked like a wolf and sounded like one too. The only obstruction to her confirmation was its stature, almost the size of a bear.

Whatever it was, the growl, intense gaze, and drool dripping off the fangs didn't suggest friendliness in the slightest.

She backed up. It took a forward step of its own. The eyes would trail her every movement. She remained stilled as she could, and swallowed the same way, but it was followed by the inevitable rise and fall of chest that came with a deep breath.

“Good doggy,” she said with another step.

That seemed to be the final straw. Its clenched teeth parted, then, a low-pitched bark that was more like a snarl.

Trees, bushes, flowers, berries—none that she recognized, none that she had time for. Wind cut the ears, blades of grass attempted the same with the ankles, only to be crushed, mixed with the dirt, kicked up and scattered.

The legs of the pants drenched in soil, heavier than they already felt.

The throat had dried from the heavy panting, and each breath felt like another weight dropped on her chest. Pain, in the throat, in the chest, in the feet. But she kept sprinting. She didn't dare to look behind, the wind and her own footsteps weren't the only things she could hear.

The prospect of the consequences of slowing down urged her to take another stride, and another. Until the lifting of the next would be caught by a protruding root. She tripped. The speed combined with a decline of the ground made her tumble downhill. By the time it stopped, she faced upward, her body screaming silently in pain. She tried to get up, only every bone and muscle rejected her wishes.

The consequences would catch up, in the form of a pounce. She only had the time to hold up her arms in a feeble defense.

The opened jaws of the wolf, saliva flying off the sharp teeth—the final sight before her eyes shut.

The four most prominent and sharp fangs would pierce the arm first, holding it in place, then the rest would follow, biting down with a force great enough to rip her arms off...was what she imagined.

The expected pain never came. She opened her eyes. The wolf gnawed at her repeatedly. It tried to bite down like in her imagination, with the only difference being a layer of transparent gold between its bloodlust and her juicy flesh.

It was thin and clear, resembling a glass panel, yet it held off the beast's teeth-tearing, claws-slashing advances.

Aside from the rotten meat-like stench of the mouth in front of her, something was different. When she looked at the peculiar shield that prevented her from being mauled to death, she felt a faint connection to it, like the connection between her and her limbs, like she could control it. So she did the most impulsive action at the moment. She pushed.

As if an extension to her arms, the shield did the same. It flew forward, slamming into the wolf, and sent it off the ground.

The beast landed on its back, then rolled back on four. The limited intelligence of the creature inhibited it from comprehending what happened, but it wouldn't care when there was a meal in front of it. It jumped again.

She didn't have time to marvel at what just happened before the next strike. Fangs thrashed against the golden panel once more, but perhaps it wasn't as stupid as she thought. Its paw reached below the shield.

*Too small.*

The thought jolted through her mind as the claws neared her abdomen. And again, the pain didn't follow.

The protection stretched vertically from a square, hovering before her at an angle. A second push, and their distance furthered.

The process would repeat.

Heavy breathing, heavier eyelids. She hadn't been moving much since the tumble, yet the panting from the earlier sprint never recovered, worse even. And—be it her imagination or not—the gold seemed to have faded ever so slightly.

She took back every thought that was remotely positive about the beast's intelligence. Surely hunting a rabbit or whatever would be more rewarding than this.

She didn't know if the exhaustion was caused by the shield, though it's more likely than not. The speed of the wolf remained, even when it had to get up and jump again after every back-and-forth. If this went on, her stamina would give out first.

Something had to be done.

She had no weapon, the only line of defense being the enigmatic shield. If she could control the size, what of the shape? The idea rooted itself in her ever-tiring head.

After yet another displacement, she put the thought into action.

*Make a pole, then a spear...no, just a sharp tip, the spearhead might get caught. Thinner, so it can all pierce through at once and not get stuck, like a nail.*

The foul stench had approached her, but engrossed in the shaping process, the hideous muzzle of the beast was mere inches away by the time she noticed. Her body moved before her head reacted—with a backward step.

Leaves, another root, her own foot, whatever it was that she tripped or slipped on. The danger left her sight soon enough, and the sky and trees came into view.

A rock, a particularly sharp stick, many could kill at this height, and if they didn't, knocking her out equated the same fate with the situation at hand. The surrounding that led to her possible end was the same to prevent that. Soft leaves cushioned the fall, and she barely felt it, or simply because she'd grown numb to it by now.

Soft fall, accompanied by the crunches that signified dryness. On her back again, the same way she opened her eyes for the first time today. She's really regretting leaving that cheap, godforsaken bed now.

Time was more than a luxury. Yet another pounce, yet another outward thrust of her arms, yet another self-inflicted total darkness. Not much changed after all.

Nothing, only the faint drip-drop noises and the warm, wet sensation on her face she initially attributed to tears. But a corpse couldn't cry.

She looked, blinking as light entered the vision that she squished so tightly shut.

The beast hung in the air by the oversized nail of hers, lodged through its head—the body twitched, and she flinched at the first one.

She didn't have time to construct the wide base that would provide some degree of defense if she failed to kill it, or catch its limp body if she did.

It got caught anyway.

The smell and the redness informed her that she didn't cry.

The breaths came in, then sharply out.

The warm droplets on her face, in her ears.

The heartbeats were there too.

So quiet, so loud.