

Trail?

Walt plowed through sticks and snow, lost in a sea of shrubs. Beyond the thicket stood only more thicket, only an endless tangle of branches. “What trail?” he muttered under the high collar of his coat.

Marlin grunted. He always grunted as he thought things over, usually before he spoke. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Walt, “what did I say?”

“You said *what trail*.”

Winter crowded Walt’s thoughts. His fingers trembled in his gloves and snowmelt soddened his toes. “Oh, I said that?”

Marlin flashed the white of his eyes. Wearing a light jacket and goddamn sneakers, he seemed perfectly at ease— like he was above the chill, like he was bragging that it didn’t bother him. That facial hair must have helped, a jungle of curls which obscured his mouth. And that monstrosity he called a hat, like a fuzzy pillow strapped to his head. Oh, it looked so warm.

“But I *was* wondering,” said Walt, “were we on a trail? Is *this* supposed to be a trail?”

Marlin’s mustache twitched as he spoke, “Yes.”

“The first thing or the second?”

“Yes.”

“Right,” said Walt, “obviously. You know, I just get caught up sometimes, and I must have overlooked—”

Marlin ran ahead, and melted into the shrubs.

“Okay, that’s cool!” Walt called after him, and shoved through the brush.

Walt should not have spoken. Why must he always speak! Every time he opened his stupid mouth, it seemed to annoy Marlin. Maybe it was something cosmetic, like the high pitch of Walt’s voice— or how his puffy upturned snout revealed the depths of his nostrils. Maybe Marlin was just tired of his bulbous ass lagging behind.

“This’ll do,” said a voice in the woods.

Walt gasped for icy air.

A bulb of fur twisted round and revealed Marlin’s face. “This’ll do fine.”

“How long were you standing there?” said Walt.

The steam of Marlin’s breath escaped his beard and emerged into the cold. Why the silence? He unstrapped his rifle and crouched, his eyes on the shrubs.

“A while, I guess.” Walt answered himself in a mutter. He huddled, and laid his rifle across his lap. Oh damn this place, where sticks were all that lived.

He missed the ski lodge. He missed teaching the kids on the bunny-hill, their eyes bright, their cheeks reddened from the cold. It always made him smile, watching their little bodies bundled in big coats, falling in the snow.

Why, oh god why had he made friends with the lift attendant, that man with a cigarette poking out from his mustache. Marlin had stood in a shelter at the top of the lift, a lonesome closet in the snow. He had watched over the hill in silence, peering beneath that stupid, giant hat.

Walt eyed the mound of hat to his right. “We’ve been out here a while, huh?”

“Six hours,” said Marlin.

“I’d call that a while. Wouldn’t you call that a while?”

Marlin spat into the snow. “I’d call it six hours.”

“That’s— more accurate. But six hours, and no rabbits. No foxes or elk.”

“We’ll find something.”

“Well, okay then,” said Walt. He rolled his eyes, and muttered into his collar, “We’ll find something.”

“I heard that.”

“No, I was— agreeing.”

Six hours since the warmth of the lodge, where Marlin had invited Walt on this godforsaken hunt. Six hours since Marlin had thrust the rifle into Walt’s hands, and promised adventure— *moderate* adventure, on a trail. He had even promised cocoa, that son of a bitch. Even as Walt was about to decline, Marlin had shrugged and delivered his most convincing line, “just for a bit.”

A fucking bit!

Walt should have spoken. Oh yes, he should have. When the novelty of his rifle faded, and it became a heavy rod— or when he requested his cocoa, and Marlin responded, *you didn’t bring any?* When ‘a bit’ became a six-hour trek through a frozen wasteland, he should have spoken.

He should speak now: *It’s time to go home. This is no longer fun. How are you enjoying this frost-fucked mountain? You should probably take a shower.* He should say it all!

“Cold out here,” said Walt. He nuzzled his collar, and wafted his face in the warmth of his breath.

“No shit.”

“I’m just saying, it’s cold out here.”

“I’m just saying, no shit. Double no-shit on that one.”

Walt rose his voice. “Well, I’ll just stop talking then. Clearly my words are not welcome. Clearly the only thing welcome here is *silence*.”

A high-pitched cry came from afar, a wail in the woods. Branches cracked in the distance. In a flash behind the sticks, an elk darted away.

Marlin shot Walt a glare, and Walt slumped back into his collar. “Well, let’s head up the trail,” said Marlin.

They climbed the gentle slope of the mountain, and the grey sky dimmed—yet the cold began to subside. The crunch of snow softened beneath Walt’s boots, and puddles of slush appeared between the bushes.

At the sight of the slush, Walt felt a surge— a tug in his chest from some unnamed worry. At last the words leapt from his lips, “We should go home.”

“You wanted to come along. If you’d rather sip cocoa at the lodge—”

“I would rather sip cocoa,” Walt declared. “Of course I want to sip cocoa. You promised me cocoa—”

“I *mentioned* cocoa.”

“— and now you berate me for wanting it!”

“I berate you.”

“Let me talk!” Said Walt. “Yes, you berate me. I just want to know, is there some reason that everything should be so unpleasant? Does cocoa somehow violate the spirit of the mountain?”

“Could you cool it with the fuckin’ cocoa?”

“I will! I will cool it with the cocoa, as soon as we head home. Until then, it officially pisses me off.”

Marlin grunted over his thoughts. “You can’t just make your anger official like that,” he said, “that’s not how anger works.”

“I’m pissed off!” Walt’s voice cracked, he struggled to breath, and his words came in whimpers— but pissed he surely was.

Marlin laughed— a boyish giggle which seemed to break his voice and face, a genuine *tee-hee-hee*, and Walt caught a flash of his teeth. “You’re so bad at this!” Marlin squeaked through the giggles, “You’re so bad at being angry.” The baritone of his voice returned with a grunt. “We’re getting loud.”

Walt’s eyes lit up. Yes, they were getting loud, weren’t they? “Hey, animals!” he yelled into the woods. “Hey, animals, we’re coming to shoot you! We want to kill you and your little children! We kill the children too, right? Run away, because we have terrible intentions!” He turned to Marlin with a half-cocked grin, “Your move, slick. Time to go home then?”

“Time to head up the trail.”

“*What fucking trail?*”

Marlin fell back on his heels, like he was pushed by a strong wind. “That was— much better. That’s some really weird, angry energy, I think that works for you.” Then he scrambled ahead, and poured his skinny body through the narrow corridors of the thicket.

Walt sank into his collar. Every step forward meant another step back, and onward they climbed. Maybe he could follow the tracks, all the way back to the lodge. Maybe he could get lost, and die alone in the woods.

Puddles of snowmelt grew and merged. They walked in a sea of slush, with islands of snow clustered around the bushes. Marlin stopped, and stood alert like like a squirrel. His eyes locked onto a target, and widened. He grunted sharply— *urgency*, he seemed to say in his animal speech.

The snow shifted in the distance. A patch of it rose up and twisted round, and a pair of dark eyes appeared in the field of white— the narrow eyes of a fox.

The fox trotted slowly forward, bouncing eye contact between Walt and Marlin. It stopped, and Walt watched its gaze drift to the barrel of Marlin's gun.

"Brave little guy," said Walt.

Marlin pulled the bolt back.

"Oh come on," Walt objected.

Marlin pushed the bolt forward.

"Come on, just look at him, he's—"

The crack of the rifle pounded Walt's ear, and the bullet struck the fox's eye. The fox reeled, and its rusty voice shrieked. It lifted its dented head, and gave Marlin a one-eyed look. Fur was torn from its cheek, baring the silver surface beneath. A flurry of sparks leapt from the wound.

"What the fuck?" said Marlin.

The fox dropped to its belly and a hissing sound came from its body. The surrounding snow drifted in.

Marlin reloaded his gun.

The hiss grew louder, its pitch rose. It climaxed to silence like a deep breath waiting to be exhaled.

Marlin took aim.

Release. A sound like the crack of a gun, but it came from the fox. Purple smoke shot out from the fox's ears, its mouth, its white fur, engulfing it in a cloud.

Marlin rushed in. Only a crater of snow remained, and not a drop of blood. The last ribbons of purple twisted off into the sky.