

Into The Forest

by Victoria Loria

The air smells so fresh, like dew first thing in the morning. Birds sing beautifully in the background. The wind brushes the leaves back and forth. *Am I dreaming?*

My eyes blink open. My chest tightens after I realize that I'm no longer in the comfort of my bedroom. The recollection of how I could have gotten here is completely gone. *Who even am I? How did I get here?*

Without a moment to lose, I begin walking, and walking, and walking even more. Everything looks the same. Pine, Maple, and Oak trees in no particular order. Anyone else would most likely be in panic mode by now, but not me. *Where is home?* A bad feeling came over me when thinking about home. That can't be good.

Rumble, rumble, rumble. Oof, that was my stomach. Finding food at this point will be impossible. I've never hunted anything in my life. Nor could I even think about doing such a thing. A small baby bear pops out of the bushes, looks me straight in the eyes with so much love, then walks away. From the corner of my eye, a large dark shadow looms over me.

With my eyes still shut, the momma bear sniffs my hand and rubs it kindly. The baby bear returns to cuddle with his mother and siblings. She doesn't hurt me. Instead, she behaves as gently as a Labrador Retriever is with small children. I scratch her neck, and she pushes in towards my hand for me to reach other itchy spots. The family moves along, as I should.

A water source must be nearby. The sounds of a running stream get louder and louder as I approach. My eyes open wide at the amazing sight: Otters playing together. A whole family of

them splashing together giddily. One of them sees me. The smallest in the pack. He comes towards me, cautious not to startle the rest of the pups, who are ignoring my presence completely. The feeling brings back feelings of rejection.

The small otter works up the courage to get close enough to me. We look into each other's eyes when he splashes me with water and makes an adorable "eep!" Another one comes closer, following the lead of her brother. One tap on her cold nose sends her diving backwards into the river. The entire family now comes over to investigate. Together, we play the tap-the-nose and dive game until the leader calls everyone to eat some fish.

I look for a bunch of dried-up wood within the forest to start a campfire. Without any tools or equipment, sticks will have to do. With friction, dried leaves, and two dry sticks, a small fire burns enough to keep me warm as the sun begins to go down. I pluck a large maple leaf from one of the trees and burn a few small rocks. On the ground, I place the maple leaf to add some of the water from the river. I take the rock from the fire with two sticks and place it in the water to boil off contamination.

The night quickly overtakes the entire forest. Knowing that the bears and otters were so friendly makes me feel safe enough to lie down on the ground to rest. Twenty minutes into shutting my eyes, I hear the howl of a wolf. Fear looms over me at the thought that a wolf might not be as kind as to allow me to stay within its territory.

A big, red alpha red wolf beams at me from a distance. Running would only make the situation worse. If he wanted to start a ruckus, he'd already be down here showing me his large teeth. But no. Instead, the alpha takes his time scoping out the area to make sure the scene is safe. One small movement at a time, he sits down under the tree closest to the burning fire.

I sit down and wait for what is going to happen next. Nothing. The two of us hang out by the fire for warmth. The alpha doesn't move a muscle and seems to be enjoying the company. He must be a lone wolf, just like me. My stomach rumbles, producing a burst of pain. It's way too late to do anything but sleep. The wolf stares at me with his head tilted as if he can tell that the hunger pangs are causing my agony. Without hesitation, he dashes straight into the freezing river. Two seconds later, he whips out a medium-sized fish that has an olive-colored body with a whitish belly. *He must be hungry too.*

Alpha runs back towards the fire, dropping the fish right next to me. He returns to the same spot underneath the tree. *Aw, for me?* It's amazing how animals can sense emotions and apparently read minds. I sharpen the two sticks from earlier to help with the gutting process. Other fish may be waiting to find food tonight, so I decide to send the inedible parts back into the river. The two of us will share this very special meal. As the fish roasts in the fire, the aroma leaves my mouth watering.

The alpha waits patiently for a piece of his hard-earned catch. Without scaring him away, I push half of the fish towards him on top of an oak leaf. I say a little prayer, then we both devour the meat with thankfulness for this beautiful moment. A yawn out of me and a howl in the distance let the alpha know that it's time to head back home.

Goodbye, friend.

"Vee! Vee! Can she hear me?" a voice says.

"I dunno. The doctor said she'd be waking up any minute now," a familiar voice states.

My eyelids want to open, but something is stopping them. Soft hands hold tightly onto mine when a wave of memories wakes me up. *My name is Vee.*

“Vee, oh Vee. Thank heavens,” my mom bursts into tears.

I wait for an explanation. My sister runs up to hug me as if she hasn’t seen me in years.

What on earth happened?

With the little strength left in me, I look over to Mom, “Mom, what happened to me?”

She braces herself. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I don’t know how to tell you this, but you have been in a coma for the past year.”

“A coma?”

“Sweetie, you might not remember right now, but things got a bit rough with your business. The market became slow, and well, it really stressed you out.” Mom continues, “You went out into the woods for a hike to clear your head. Then a landslide occurred.”

I take in a very deep breath. *How in the world can I take all this in?* The open window brings in a comforting breeze, one that I know so well. Out in the distance, I see the forest, the place that I love—immediately longing for the friends I once knew. *The real question is, how do I know what is reality and what isn’t?*

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