

ELI

The day was fading in The Forest. Looking straight ahead, one could see the setting sun through the long trees. Toby and his son, Eli, were packing up the day's hunt, he wasn't one to brag, but his son had grown up nicely; at ten years, Eli could carry his weight in meat and not break a sweat. Dawn, his wife, said it was her cooking, and he could not argue with her, mostly because she was his wife but also because that woman could do wonders with meat. Sometimes he wondered if it was still the same meat he hunted.

“What story do you want to hear today?” Toby asked Eli as soon as their loads were on their backs. They had developed a tradition where he would tell Eli a story every day after a hunt. Initially, it had started to serve as a distraction from all the noises in The Forest, which scared Eli when he was younger, but over the years, it had grown on them. Occasionally, he would throw in a cautionary tale whenever there was the need for one, not that day.

It had been a while since Eli had heard the story about the Princess and the Prince. It had become his favorite of all his father's tales. Pretending he hadn't decided, Eli feigned deep thought for a second. “How about the tale of the Prince and Princess who fell in love? It has been a while.” Eli asked 'absentmindedly,' and Toby smiled. He had made up a lot of stories throughout their hunts. Some were genuinely terrible, and some okay, but this one was his favorite too.

Toby cleared his throat and began in his deep, clear voice. "Long, long ago," Toby paused as always for dramatic effect, and Eli smiled. Sometimes he could swear that every time his father began telling a story, the birds and insects in the trees would go quiet to listen. Toby continued, “when there was still magic in the land, there existed two kingdoms; there was the magic kingdom and the non-magic kingdom." Eli had once asked why they didn't live together, and his father had explained rather passionately that man was a jealous and greedy creature trying to manipulate the magic folk since the beginning of time. After trying and failing rather miserably to acquire the magic for themselves, they had decided to banish them.

At the edge of the kingdom had been a forest no one dared go deep, for it was believed to harbor the vilest of creatures. The King banished them to the forest and everything that lay beyond it. In his mind, he was sentencing them to death. Little did he know they would thrive on the other side of The Forest and build their kingdom.

"In the two kingdoms, there were born heirs at the same time; a Prince, Christopher, for the non-magic folk and a Princess, Olive, for the witches and wizards. These two heirs were to be taught the ways of their people from a very young age, so they were given free rein over their kingdoms, and for them, that meant they could go into any place they liked. Born with an intense curiosity, they wanted to know what lay in The Forest and beyond. Each day they would go inside The Forest and roam for a bit, and the following day they would return and roam further. After some time, the two were bound to cross paths, and they did.

"They were still children at the time, and they talked about their love for The Forest and all its misconceptions. They had been roaming there for a while, yet not a single animal had attacked them. Of course, they knew to avoid the darker parts of The Forest. That day after their meeting, they stayed in The Forest until dark, not wanting to leave. They feared they might not see each other again, but they did. Every day for the next several years, they would meet at the boundary and embark on a new adventure together. One day it was hunting; another day, it would be watching birds or climbing trees and eating the highest berries, but most of the time, they would walk around enjoying each other's company.

"Years went by, and the two matured. One day Olive was about to leave for her meet-up with Chris, as it had become custom, when her parents stopped her. 'You are a woman now. Women have responsibilities to their families and more so, in your case, to the kingdom,' they said and started preparing her to wed. Just like that, her life with Chris had ended, or so she thought. That day was the darkest

she had experienced yet. She cried her eyes dry and locked herself in her room, not wanting to eat, drink, or talk to anyone.

"Like every other day, Chris went to their spot and waited for a few minutes. He could sense a sadness in the birdcalls, the way the trees swayed, even the sun wasn't hitting their spot the way it usually did. He felt a fear grasp his heart and squeeze it so hard it almost stopped beating.

Eli sprinted to the magic kingdom, and there he asked around. He heard that the queen was looking for a suitor for her daughter, and he realized what he needed to do. He returned home and asked for his parent's permission, but the mere mention of the magic folk was enough to make them furious. It was then that he realized how much hatred they harbored against magic folk, especially the King. He tried to explain that they were people just like them, but they did not want to hear it. After pleading with his parents incessantly for a while, they had him confined to his room.

"Three days had passed when he was allowed to leave his room. He ditched his new guards the soonest he could and raced through the forest to the magic kingdom. After eavesdropping here and there, he discovered that the Princess had found a suitor and was getting married that night. At that point, he looked around and noticed that the town was extra excited, with everyone everywhere trying to get somewhere or something. His heart sunk in his chest, and he felt tears in his eyes for the first time since he could remember. Olive was the truest friend he had in his life, and if she got married, there was a real possibility they might never see each other again. That realization gave him a determination to see her even for one last time to say a proper goodbye.

"Getting inside the castle that day was easier than any other day. The guards had all been allowed to take a break, so Chris walked right through the front door. The trick, as always, was appearing as if he belonged. Eli picked up a gift at the door and carried it upstairs purposefully, and luckily for him, they had been there so many times he

knew it almost better than his own house. Nodding at everyone he met in the hallways with a smile, he arrived at the Princess's chambers.

"He pushed the door, and it bulged without effort; it was unlocked. He entered, and there was no one else apart from Olive. She was facing away from the door. The dress she had on was of the purest white he had seen; it flowed to just above her ankles. Her feet donned white strapped slippers with gems on the straps, and her tiny beautiful feet with nail polish looked Princess probably for the first time. Her hair, shiny and straightened, was tied in a bun. Chris looked at her, and it was like he was seeing her for the first time. Growing up with her had blinded him to the beautiful woman she had come to be, and looking at her then, she was the most beautiful person he had set his eyes on. He locked the door behind him, walked up to her, and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Olive felt his hands on her waist, and all of a sudden, she felt safe, warm, and loved. Her heartbeat, which had begun to fade, returned with vigor. She pulled his hands even tighter around her body and let his scent comfort her. Typically she criticized the eucalyptus-scented soaps he used, but that day it was the most beautiful scent.

"Chris felt at home. If everything else in his life was taken away and only Olive was left, he knew he would be fine. He wanted to stay like that forever but knew it was only a matter of time before the bride was needed; it was her wedding, after all. He pulled his arms away with a lot of resistance and turned her to face him. Looking into her face there, he realized what he felt for her was love. 'Marry me.' Chris wasn't sure what he had wanted to say when he opened his mouth, but that was what he said. He watched as the sadness on Olive's face transformed into a smile most beautiful; he couldn't help but smile too. Olive embraced him and said, 'Yes.' It was like all the growing they had done over the past years vanished because they squealed and jumped around the room like they were kids once more.

"Chris and Olive ran away from her parents' house and sought refuge among the citizens. There, they announced to both of their

parents their decision. They would have been furious if the two married someone that they had not approved but to make it worse, they were from the other kingdom. The debate between the two families went on for ten short minutes, and it was decided that the two couldn't be married.

Within that short time, the bravery of the Prince and the Princess spread everywhere. Even after being refused permission by parents from both sides, they still decided to proceed with the marriage, and people from all kingdoms went to celebrate with them. This called for another meeting on both sides; what to do with the rebels. Both kingdoms decided on banishment, and the magic kingdom placed an unknown curse on them.

“Chris, Olive, and their supporters retreated to The Forest to start a community, and they couldn't have been happier. The people started building, and soon they transformed a section of that forest into a village of their own. Olive and her friends worked tirelessly, and soon they discovered the curse that had been placed on Chris and her, and they undid it. After several years, the small village turned into a small kingdom where all people, magical and non-magical, were welcome.” Toby finished the story just as they came up to their house. As always, Eli was overcome with happiness.

The two came up to their house, and there was no light in it; Dawn hadn't started the fire yet. "Where is mother?" Eli asked, full of concern once they were in the house. They searched and called out for her, but neither was forthcoming.

"Maybe she felt better and went for a walk," Toby said in an attempt to reassure him. That morning when they had left, Dawn had been in bad condition and couldn't do much by herself; he barely believed what he was saying himself. Eli caught up on that.

"It can be dangerous outside, more so now that it is dark. Shouldn't we go look for her? Maybe she sat down to rest and fell asleep." Eli was trying to hide his panic, but he cared for his mother deeply. Toby saw that and bent down to speak to him.

"We are going to do that soon. First, let's build a fire and make a meal, so she has something warm to eat when she gets here, okay?" Toby looked into his eyes, and this time Eli believed him and took great comfort in it.

The two banded together, working hand in hand, and made a fire as quick as possible. Each contributed a piece of wood to the fireplace, and eventually, Toby struck the match, and a flame was born. Proud of themselves, they smiled and bumped fists. Toby then found a pot and started cutting meat into it as Eli fetched water. Soon, there was a pot of meat on a great fire, and they could embark on looking for Dawn.

"It is quiet tonight; I might get a full night's sleep after we have found mother," Eli said at the door on their way out. Toby was about to nod when he listened. It was quiet, too quiet for a forest, he was worried, and Eli saw it. "Is quiet not a good thing?" he asked.

"Not always Eli, sometimes it just means that the animals that roam the night are too afraid to make a sound or they might be heard."

"Are you saying there might be something out there more dangerous than the wolves and wild dogs?" Eli was afraid and concerned at the same time. His mother was there, and not so long ago, their herd had

been ravaged by a wild dog. They had put up a more reliable fence, but if wild dogs were scared, he had a feeling it might not hold.

“I’m going to need you to stay here and make sure to lock the door after me,” Toby said fiercely.

As much as Eli wanted to go with him, he also wanted him to find his mother, which could prove troublesome were he to tag along. He watched his father disappear into The Forest, machete swinging in one hand and a bow and quiver filled with arrows on his back with eyes both hopeful and fearful, then got in the house and locked the door.

Eli had been alone in the house for almost an hour. At first, he checked every slight sound he heard outside, hoping it was his parents, but the checks had grown further and further apart until he had stopped completely. Now he just sat by the fire and poked the flames to watch the sparks fly in the air forming various forms. Occasionally he would ‘check’ the readiness of the meat cooking.

Eli was sitting by the fire when he heard panting. He was about to dismiss it when his father yelled for him to open the door. Eli rushed and pulled the latch in one fast motion. Looking outside, he saw his father running towards him as if a volcano had just blown behind him. He didn’t have any weapon on him. Eli looked around but couldn’t see what he was running from at first. It was after he was in the house yelling at him to lock it that he saw a pair of shining eyes approaching fast. He locked the door and walked away from it. His father was leaning on the wall heavily. Illuminated by the flames, he could see the blood in his clothes and the gashing cuts on his face. He was trying to avoid looking him in the eye, but Eli wanted to see.

“What was that? What happened to your face? Where is mother? Where...?” Toby covered Eli’s mouth with his hand and pulled him further away from the door, all the while wincing from pain all over his body. With each step he took, there was a trail of blood left behind. The door was hit with such brute force it shook the whole house; the beast was at their door. Eli’s fear multiplied but as much as he wanted to talk, all that came out of his mouth were murmurs and gasps.

"Eli, I need you to listen to me carefully," Toby whispered and waited for him to nod before he continued. "Your mother is gone. The beast that made all the other animals of The Forest cower is at our door, and it cannot hold." The door was rammed again, and by the sound of it, it was giving in. "Do you remember the path that goes to the village?" Eli nodded. "You are going to go out through that window and run until you find it, then run some more until you come up to the village; the people there will help you. If they ask you who you are, tell them you got lost in The Forest and have just found your way out, okay?" Eli nodded with tears blurring his vision. Toby could see he had a lot of questions but every minute that passed was more time for the door to fall. "I'm sorry I can't come with you, but if I do, I will be putting you at risk. This is the only way one of us gets out of here alive. I need you to never look back, okay? Go and start a life of your own. Tears were falling freely as Toby lifted him over the window. Eli held onto his father's hand for a minute before he dropped to the ground. He then turned to The Forest and started running while sobbing at the same time. As he ran, he heard the door break with a bang, followed by grunts and panting from his father and growling from the beast, and then silence. Eli felt his heart break in his chest, and more tears flowed, but he ran still.

Dawn, the following morning found a merchant, Fred, and his helper, June, riding a cart being pulled by two mules on the road bordering The Forest on their way to the market. Fred was blowing a tobacco pipe; he had gotten it from Arab traders as a gift. June was sorting some of the goods they would be trading in the back. The mules were racing down a slope when Fred yanked their reins, bringing them to an abrupt halt. June hit her head on the cart.

"Fred, this is the last time I'm warning you. If you stop that suddenly again you are going to regret it," an annoyed June shouted.

"Sorry about that June but I think I saw a kid on the side of the road, will you go check please."

“A kid? At this time? Are so desperate to get cheap labor that you would wish that on someone’s child?”

"Will you please go check? It will only take a minute." June stared at him coldly for a minute, then jumped off the cart. She looked around for a minute and was about to jump back in the cart when she saw something peculiar a few meters back. She walked back, and Fred was right. Right there beside the road, a boy was curled up in a ball, shaking like a twig in a storm. She tried to lift his chin, but he was cold as ice. She removed her sweater and wrapped him in it before calling Fred. "Hey kid, are you lost?" Fred asked, but the boy just shook.

“Can you at least wait until he has warmed up before you can interrogate him?” June snapped.

“Why did you call me here then?”

“To carry him to the cart, duh! He is bigger than me.”

"I liked you better when you were a small shy girl, all this growing up is not doing me any good," Fred said as he lifted Eli into the cart.

The day was getting away from them fast. It was almost midday, yet they had barely delivered half the goods they had to before sunset. Eli whipped the mules to increase their speed, then joined June in the cart.

Five years had gone by since she and Fred had found him by the side of the road. Fred had taken him in and brought him up just as he had done her after her parents had died. A few weeks afterward, he had started assisting him in his trading activities just like June did and got to make a few shillings for himself. He thought of going to The Forest a few times over the years, but there was never enough time in his hands. Recently there had been rumors of beasts terrorizing the villages neighboring The Forest, and for a while, people hadn't believed them until one of the villages was ravaged in a night. The King had announced that there would be hunting competitions in search of a team that would take upon themselves the task of hunting down the beasts that were causing chaos in the kingdom for a handsome reward. Eli had been considering joining the competitions but wasn't sure how to approach the subject with June and Fred; they had come to rely heavily on him, yet time was running out.

Eli sat opposite June in the cart; she was sorting the produce. He stared at her for a minute, wondering if it was a good time to bring up the subject. He cleared his throat, and she looked up. Their gaze held for a minute before he shied away. "What is it? Are you going to profess your love for me?" June asked teasingly. "Since my boobs became the size of mangoes, everyone seems to be."

"No. Of course not." Eli recoiled.

"Are you saying I'm ugly?" June stopped sorting and stared at him fiercely.

"You are beautiful June, you know that."

"I just like hearing it, what about my boobs what do you think of them?"

“We are not talking about your boobs. I wanted to tell you that I want to join the hunting competition!” Eli blurted out. No matter how much bigger than her he got, she always intimidated him.

“Now, was that so hard to say?” June said, smiling.

“Are you saying you knew?” Eli looked at her in disbelief.

“Of course, I did. We have been together practically every day for the past five years Eli, I pick up on things.”

“How do you think Fred is going to take it?”

“He is going to try and convince us to stay, we are his only family slash employees, but he had to know we were going to leave at some point.”

“We? Are you leaving too?”

“I’m not a child anymore, I have to get a life of my own. I’ve been wanting to do something different for a while, I might as well do it now. Besides, if you leave and I remain, I will be swamped which will make it even harder to leave.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I’m still weighing my options.”

“We could join the hunting competition as a team.” June eyed him and laughed sarcastically. She had never shot an arrow in her life. The only blade she was accustomed to was the knife she used to peel fruits. Eli knew that. “Hunting is not that hard, and you’ll have me as a teacher; you never know, you might be a natural. When we win, you can use your share to help you weigh your options. I bet you’ll have more options then.” June had seen Eli practice with a bow and arrows he bought with his first salary, and she did like their chances.

“Someone likes me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, hunting can be a nightmare alone.”

“Keep telling yourself that. You do know they have an age limit; you have to be at least seventeen to enter the competition.”

“You insult me. I am bigger than most seventeen-year-olds, I could tell them I’m eighteen and they would believe it.” June didn’t argue.

Over supper that night, they informed Fred of their decisions. As expected, he wasn't thrilled. First, he tried to guilt them into staying, which didn't work. That was followed by raising their pay which didn't work either. When he realized nothing would make them stay, he called them ungrateful and stormed out. Later he returned with their replacements and rubbed it in their faces.

The hunting competitions being only four days away, Eli and June spent every waking moment trying to turn her into a hunter, and that was no small feat. He had to teach her how to move in The Forest, which plants to avoid, which insects' stings could be fatal, how to set traps and avoid said traps, how to hold a bow, and how to build a bow. If he was going to list the things she needed to learn, he might not he might not have had time to teach them at all. The first day of their training ended at dusk, and June wasn't any better than when she had walked into The Forest; he was frustrated.

June observed as he built a fire. He looked different when he was in The Forest; more mature, in control, and capable, there was even a hint of danger in his eyes. As he skinned the rabbits he had caught, she could sense a determination on his side. Looking at him in the light of the flames, she wondered whether his desire to join the hunting competition might have had something to do with his parents. Fred had eaten up the story he had told about his parents getting lost in The Forest while he managed to find his way out, but they hadn't. "Eli, this feels like it is important to you. There is a chance that I might not be the hunter you need in the next three days; I think it would be best if you went alone; I'd find something else to do."

"Don't be absurd," Eli said, a little smile forming on his face, then continued skinning. June waited for him to say something else, but that was it. The following day they resumed their training.

Eve of the hunting competition found the two sitting at their usual spot, relaxed. That day they had concluded training early to regain some energy for the competition. After many rabbits of exercise, June could now skin a rabbit on her own. Eli felt proud seeing her pull the skin off.

"I'm a fast learner; stop thinking you are solely responsible," June said, seeing him grin as she roasted the rabbit.

"Even fast learners can't be fast without good teachers."

“Are you going to finally tell me why this is so important to you?” June asked as she turned the rabbit over.

“If we do this, we become legends. The people who saved the kingdom from village ravaging beasts. When we are done, all doors will be open to us, we will have the finest of everything.”

"Are you not at all curious about what became of your parents? I would be." Eli took a deep breath and then exhaled. "They are dead." He said, poking the fire. "I saw them die, but the circumstances would have been unbelievable back then."

"Are you saying we are hunting the possible murderer of your parents?"

“You can say I’m motivated.”

The King himself opened the hunting competition the following day. The candidates gathered at the edge of The Forest, and he gave a speech no one cared much for before announcing that the top five hunters or teams would be armed from The King’s armory to hunt the beast

Eli looked around. He was in a weird crowd. There were all sorts of people in there, most were armed, but some weren't. By looking around, he could point out with certainty a few people who would not make it to sunset. He felt somewhat confident, seeing had practically grown up in The Forest, and his father had taught him well.

When The King left, they entered The Forest, and as they went deeper, the crowds thinned, and eventually, they were about five of them going in the same direction. There was Eli and June and a group of three other hunters. Their leader, Evans, had an air of confidence about him; he even moved like an experienced hunter. Eli felt a little nervous. They moved silently for a while before branching out.

“Do you know where you are going?” June asked as they moved.

“The deeper we go, the more vicious the animals we’ll encounter.” Isaac was excited.

“Have you been this deep before?”

“I lived deeper than this, trust me.” The two walked for some time before Eli heard dry twigs crunch. Eli stopped, and June followed suit. He hooked an arrow and slowly looked around. He heard the crunching die away in the opposite direction and returned his arrow to the quiver.

“What was that?” June asked.

“Probably one of the other hunters.”

“How could you tell?”

“There were two feet and way more noise than any animal living this deep makes.” Their movement slowed, and they became more alert as they moved in, it was getting quiet, and the tree canopy made it dusky. Eli stopped suddenly, and this time June could tell it was dire. She watched as goosebumps rose on his neck and his arm moved slowly to the machete strapped to his waist. She was about to ask what he saw when she heard soft growling above them. She looked up, and staring at them with its shiny eyes was the most giant leopard she had seen. A gasp escaped her mouth as she reached for her machete, unsure what she would do with it. She watched Eli's blood pump faster at his neck as he threw his machete at the leopard, hitting it in the head. The leopard growled as it pounced at him, throwing him a short distance away. Eli landed on all fours. The leopard was eyeing him fiercely. June was frozen; her first hunt wasn't going very well.

Eli growled at the leopard, his eyes open wide and wild. His machete lay about three meters away, and there was no way he would reach it before the leopard tore into him. He slowly felt the back of his belt for a dagger he carried, and there it was, like an oasis in a hot desert. He smiled and growled once more as the leopard posed to attack. Digging into the ground with his right foot for support, he waited for the leopard to make a move. The leopard bent down his chin, almost touching the ground, and then jumped. Within a fraction of a second, Eli leaped forward and upwards, turning in the air to land on the leopard's back, and the dagger was lodged in the flesh at the back of its head. The leopard, dead, lay on the ground as Eli stood up. He walked

to June, and she was still trembling in shock. He sat her down and built a fire.

It was after he had caught a few rabbits, skinned them, and roasted them that June found her tongue. "We should be dead." She said, quivering.

"But we are not."

"What you did is impossible. No one kills a leopard like that."

"But I did."

"Aren't you worried there might be others?"

"This one wasn't even supposed to be here, they are usually much deeper than this, we got lucky."

"You got lucky. Why do you even need me here if you can kill a leopard with a knife that could just as easily be used for peeling potatoes?"

"Sometimes things don't always go this smoothly, you never know when you might need a second pair of hands."

They arrived at the edge of The Forest just as the sun set to meet groups of hunters bloody and exhausted. Eli was not surprised that only a fraction of the original group had made it out, some had quit, and others had perished. Each hunter had a story; some didn't need words; their bodies told it all. The sight of Eli and June with a leopard on their shoulders quietened the whole crowd. Everyone was in awe.

"Hasn't any of you seen a dead leopard before?" Eli asked as they set it down. The crowd continued conversing in lowered tones, but their eyes scarcely left the dead leopard and its slayers. Those whose egos let them went to Eli and June to hear how they had done it, and each left with disbelief. They got first place obviously, followed by who had captured a rather huge wolf. The rest had varying sizes of wild dogs and hyenas. The King bought the dead leopard and wolf to dry and pup up or display in the throne room. Everyone who had returned from The Forest with a kill, even those who did not make The King's hunting team, were invited to The King's house for a feast.

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