

Always these same woods.

The shades of green dulled and soothed me. I soaked in the cool mist of the morning, weaving through the towering trees whose shadows shrouded everything I knew. They sparingly sprinkled sunlight on the forest floor, dispersing little patches of warmth to spark some hope for a fire aflame.

So there I always was, kindling fragile ashes for heat. There, I resided, with only my mind and scampering creatures for company. I had no concept of loneliness, only longing. And my mind, dear companion that it was, always told me that I was just fine. And it was right; I survived just fine.

But one cold night amid a dreary winter, I terrorized myself while tucked under a thick wool blanket, the heaviest that I possessed. The Cimmerian darkness enveloped me, calmed me, and drove me to the edge of my existence. Nothing was there, and nothing would appear if I had reached out, nothing for me to touch and hold onto to pull myself up. I asked myself why I felt so forsaken in this lush land, for I had everything I thought I needed around me, yet I still craved something that was not there. I received no answer besides a resounding silence and the feeling of absolute stillness as if I were a statue suspended in time. I could not hear my breath or beating heart, and the hollowness in my chest threatened death.

Then, I wondered how a drop of warmth would feel in the dark. Would it radiate from my skin to my chest to the chilled marrow of my bones? The sudden spark of thought had singed me too soon, so I let it starve and fizzle out. I refused to risk a flare, for it would burn my whole house down. Still, swamped with sentimentality the next day, I swept its cinders into a chest and closed the lid gently for safekeeping.

Years went by, years upon years, but it all felt like a single day because everything had stayed the same.

Until one morning, I left my place and walked till nightfall. Then night gave way to dawn, and on and on. I took another step, past each old tree, stepping on each wrinkled leaf. I walked till I collapsed, then crawled a bit more until I could stand. I staggered from tree to tree, clinging onto each too desperately, still seeing no reason to retreat. The aching in my soles begged me to stop, but I welcomed the pain into the cavity of my chest instead, wincing each time I drew breath.

I was in no hurry, but I wasted no time. I had no destination in mind, for I did not believe in destiny. An undetected urge to press forward propelled me, forcing me to abandon my old, murderous monotony, so I inched on, driving myself toward death so that I could maybe live.

I had worn myself thin by the time I reached the clearing. I crept into the open like a bear just woken from hibernation, pulling itself out of its cave. The sun beat down on my back, thawing out my skin. The sky was clear—cloudless and blue, and I thought I could lie under it forever. In the center of the field, there was a slip of paper, weathered and crinkled, lying there in the soft, tender grass. I stretched out to touch it, dying to know what it said. It looked like it was halfway through decomposition, but I wanted it anyway. I wanted to hold it against me and have it as a companion before I knew what it even was.

So I did. It melted away the cold of the summer, and I felt it—an instant calefaction. My eyes sought to devour the words right then, but the letters swam and circled me in a flurry, imbued with golden energy. They lifted me, set me on my feet, and carried me back to my

cryogenic cottage that I now considered a cage as the letter I clutched with white fingertips became my home. The crimp-covered paper had lit an inferno, ignited a fervency.

I opened my door, fashioned of cracked brown wood, and sank onto the icy floor. Here, I had streams to drink from and berries to eat, but the heavenly nourishment did not beckon me back. I had not eaten a single bite during my trip, and I felt no need. It was a sense of obligation that prompted my return. Something asked me to come home, and it would have been cruel of me to refuse. I would have assented to anything it suggested I do. I had a mind of my own, but my will was pliable. I only desired to read the words on the pages I held, but it commanded me to rest. It was unwritten, but a whisper told me that I was still too weak, and I agreed. The fine thread of life I hung onto to make it to the clearing was unraveling. The next several days and nights, I nursed myself back to health and chastised myself for trying to walk to the ends of the earth, even if I had floated here by some divinity.

Upon gaining enough energy to move about, I unfolded the letter and held it whenever I could. If my hands were busy, I placed it on my nightstand next to a candle stub that I could not light. Every other moment, I gazed at it longingly, patient yet hungering.

An eternity later, I convalesced. My head no longer spun, and my muscles were no longer sore. I reached for the letter as it sat there, waiting pristinely. I moved the sheet with overcautious delicacy, watching my fingers tremble from holding it so still and gingerly. Each crease promised another story; each word was an undeserved gift. Guilt rushed over me for clasping it in my hands, telling me that I was unworthy. But I studied the text again, and it assuaged any contrition. The paper was soft like worn-in leather, supple like fresh cotton sheets. So old, an antique, that it made my heart lurch from the thought of it disintegrating in my hands.

And oh, my hands were on fire, I was sure of it. My eyes blazed and watered as the words scorched and smoldered my skin, burning in irreproachable sin. Each phrase was exquisite; each pen stroke, unblemished. Each sentence etched itself into my mind, branding my brain in bliss. The frost that always tried to bite ebbed as a hazy blaze illuminated the room. Golden, glowing, soothing, the letter enkindled something new.

On my nightstand, the minute chest—a small wooden container that I had set aside eons ago—gleamed now with a sliver of shine leaking through the crack under the lid. At once, I opened it, unable to keep away from the scintillating object. I had forgotten about it over time, let it fall to the wayside of my mind, but the flush of feeling returned as if I had never pushed it away. I flicked it open with a fingernail and fell back. I tried to see, but the brightness blinded me. Light filled the room and permeated every pore of my body. My eyes were slow to adjust, but they were glad they did. Because waiting there, evermore forbearing, was someone more like me than I had ever encountered, a reflection of my darkest, unseen shadows. Hovering in the air, so foreign yet familiar, it felt so much like home. I had never understood the idea until I gripped the piece of parchment and hugged it to my chest like it was salvation. It looked at me with its round eyes wide as if it could not believe the sight. An ashy hand reached to me, phantasmic and blurred, and rested on my fingertips. It peered at me in disbelief. I felt a feverish touch, high and ardent. It scalded my palm, searing into me a mark. I trained my gaze on it only, committing each second to memory.

And then it was gone, but the warmth of it stayed for the rest of my days.