

## On The Side of Some Mountain

He lived in a cabin on the side of a mountain. He didn't know the mountain's name – he'd begun walking into the forest without a map, without any knowledge of the place. He'd lost something in that old life, and had come here for a new one.

He'd done something foolish. He'd stopped at the base of this mountain – though it had seemed like a hill at the time – and decided where to live based on how tired he was. That animal logic had been the basis for his foundation in this valley. Well enough, perhaps, that he'd chosen the site for his cabin at random. Without knowledge, it was the best he could have done. Better than a bad guess.

He'd done foolish things. By building his cabin from nearby trees he'd created a meadow surrounding his residence. This caused a mudslide some time around his second year; one which nearly killed him. His home stood out like a sore thumb, though no adventurers had yet knocked on his door.

There was nothing profound in that old life. No noticing – no appreciation of one's surroundings. He had moved through that old life like a piston, gathering and expending energy for a larger machine that he couldn't understand. He had been a mechanism through which flowed money and time.

He had only his hatchet and bow now. In this new life, he couldn't rely on the nearest food truck or shopping center to satisfy his animal urges. A barrier went up between his needs and his satisfaction. His every step became profound, his every hour a chance to better himself or perish. Anything else, he now believed, was not truly living.

His door rattled under the bear's claws. He had one small hole in his ceiling – anything more would be suicide in the cold winter months – but times like these made him miss the luxury of a window. He looked up at that man-sized hole in his ceiling and wondered if he should get up onto his roof. The cabin was a mere ten-by-ten feet. The bear could easily smash down the door – by its growl he guessed it to be at least half a ton. Should it enter, he'd have three seconds to scramble out the hole in his roof. He'd give all the windows in the world for a back door.

The bear rumbled toward the opposite end of the house. He closed his eyes in relief. Climbing up prematurely might have been fatal. Of course the bear knew he was here. But it was fall, and it would be searching for meals roughly man-sized. It was better to remain out of sight. The bear scratched itself against the bull pine walls, but the house stood firm.

He heard the bear turn again. It moved back toward the door. How like an animal. How asystematic. It began huffing at the baseboards again, its shadow falling over the threshold. He wondered what the bear meant by all that sniffing. Surely it knew what lay inside the cabin. The bear did not have a plan. It collected sense without purpose.

He waited. He had his bow in hand, though he did not expect arrows to save him. He had sympathy with the predator. If he could not save himself with the arrows, it would be better not to wound the animal at all.

His heartbeat crescendoed in his eardrums, and his fingers shook with adrenaline. He looked down at the nock of his arrow, and at his grip there. He could not shoot – he knew that now.

He took the arrow from the catgut string and let it fall by his side. The arrows – each of his twelve arrows – were holy to him. He lay his bow next to the missile, flexing his fingers all the while to end their drugged spasms. He would die on his own terms.

He knelt down by the bow and bowed his head. The *hurruf* of the bear's massive lungs sent leaves skittering under the door. He closed his eyes. The bear may or may not kill him. But had he not come here for death? He had never meant to live in the forest. He had meant to die here.

His fingers still shook as he listened to the bear trundle away from the door. Night was coming, and even the bear could taste the coming snow on the wind. His fingers felt like wax, dirty and limp as they were. He sighed and put his fingers into his armpits, crossed arms hugging his chest in the hope of regulating his breath.

His body did not want to die. He had meant to be calm – had meant to face death with quiet conviction. His body had betrayed him. Something deep within was ready to fight tooth and claw to hold on.

He knew this from his first days in the forest. Laying down on that first fateful walk, he'd never intended to rise. But he'd built a house, learned to hunt and forage. A monumental effort, for a dead man.

He listened to the wind whistling over the hole in his roof. The wind played his house like a jug. He rose. He needed to start a fire – a small one – before darkness truly set upon him. He needed to cook and eat and sleep.

He heard knocking from within the drunkenness of sleep. It was different than the scraping of bear claws or the rattling of wind. He listened for a few seconds more. The repetition and regularity were human. The precise planning – the pauses between knocks to allow for call and response – it was almost foreign to him now.

*Hello*, called a voice from the outside. Another shock of knuckles on wood. *Hello, is anyone there?*

He rose, carefully peeling himself from his deerskin. He laid his covers to the side and stared at the fire. He'd left the fire burning. This was it. This creature would not leave as the bear had. No two men can meet each other unscathed.

*I need help*, said the voice. It was a female voice, then. *I need help badly*.

He looked into the fire. He was no longer afraid. Film seemed to fall from his eyes as he stared at the flame. The voice outside was afraid. He felt sympathy for the prey.

He stood and took his bow in hand, stringing it in a breathless half-second. He nocked an arrow. He looked down at himself. He was armed and fully clothed. His jeans were torn and patched with small hides, his jacket stiff and loosely tied with leather straps. He would not kill this woman. He would simply cause her to move along.

*Please*, the voice said.

He stared at the door. Yes, he was nervous. But it was a different type of anxiety; one of anticipation rather than fear. *I will open the door*, he said, *if you back away*.

He hadn't spoken to another human in years. *I am sorry*, he said, *I am afraid*.

The voice barked an affirmative *yah*, and the woman seemed to back away from the cabin. He walked to the door and undid the slotted latch. He nudged the door open

with his foot and walked back apace, holding the bow parallel to the floor so not as to hinder himself against the low ceiling.

He'd done something foolish again. Staring into the fire, he'd gotten his eyes used to the light. This night was pitch black, with only the dim blue of frost for contrast. Now he could only see her in silhouette. There was, however, a reflection in her eyes – a dim sheen of orange that mirrored his dying fire.

His eyes began to readjust. The woman had a green jacket that had been torn down the side. She carried herself on a walking stick that had been fashioned from local lumber – probably carved this very day, from the looks of it.

She nodded, and he returned the gesture. He lowered his bow.

He woke sore the next morning. He wasn't in his pelts and furs. He was laying on the hard-packed earth he kept for a floor.

He rolled over and looked at the fire. It had burned to embers. Beyond those small sparks of life lay his pelts and furs, open and empty.

There had been a woman, he thought. He'd offered her his sleeping area and placed himself so that the fire separated their sleeping bodies. It seemed the knightly thing to do.

There hadn't been much need for talking between them. She had been attacked in some way, though he hadn't pried too far into the details. She had seemed surprised to find him there, surprised that he could only supply shelter and protection. It had seemed that way, at least.

He groaned and sat up. The wind hummed its tune over the hole in his roof. Perhaps she had stepped outside. He stood and made his way to the door.

His hand hovered over the slotted latch. Why, he wondered, did he want to check on her? Would he prevent her from leaving? Talk? He'd come away from her world. That was the end of it.

Perhaps she meant to report his whereabouts. The thought excited something in his chest. Fury first, then...

He went for his bow. Without thinking, he took it, strung it, and gathered his twelve arrows. He began to wonder what he meant by bringing up his weapon. He made his way to the door.

His hand hovered over the latch. He sighed. Perhaps it would be better to stay inside until the danger had passed. But what did he have to fear?

He opened the latch and stepped outside. The ground crunched beneath his feet. He surveyed his meadow. There was no sign of the woman. There were no telltale footprints around the door. Of course, the frost and mud had managed to disguise even the bear's fresh tracks. The woman had been light and nimble, hadn't she? She could have gotten out of the cabin without his noticing. She could be headed back to safety at this very moment.

He began to walk, closing the door behind him. A light snow fell between the pine branches. He began walking away from the mountain.

He began to smile at himself. The woman had been a part of some dream. She'd been a figment of his imagination. A self-delusional fantasy.

Yet he continued to walk. It wasn't that he wanted to chase her. No – there was something else that carried him away from the cabin. He remembered his walk from civilization, his escape from the monotony and cheap living that taxed him so.

He'd come to this forest with the intention of taking his own life. That had been his fantasy. But it only struck him now why he'd survived. Death hadn't been the fantasy. The fantasy was that someone would come to rescue him. He'd wanted only for a hero to come and give him everything he most desired.

No hero had come. Then, picking up hatchet and flint, he'd become his own hero. He smiled, watching the snow come down. Now began the lean months of winter, those weeks dedicated to rest and contemplation. He would celebrate another year as his own master and slave back in the cabin, if he turned around now.

Yet he kept on, not noting the path behind or ahead. He was unsure of where his feet took him, yet he found himself unable to stop.

He entered another clearing. To his surprise, he was on the path that had taken him to his home on the unnamed mountain. He found himself going back to that old world he hated so.

He'd either dreamt of the woman or met her. If it had been a fantasy, some part of him was crying out for her to be real. And if she was real, he could not stay on the side of that mountain. He knew that now.