

WOODLAND IRE

By
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“What are we going to do?” Kayla asked.
“Wait,” Shaw replied.
Kayla leered at Shaw impatiently. “Don’t you think we’ve waited long enough?”
Shaw turned his head and set a hard gaze on the silent forest in the distance, rich and lush and wafting with sweet, fruity aromas that beguiled the nose. He jerked his eyes away and said. “We’ll go tomorrow.”



Early the next morning a team of five packed their gear and entered the woods. Kayla had wanted to go out in search for the expedition of eight on the fourth day of their absence, her husband had been one of the eight. But Shaw, along with many others, had been more reserved. Gut feelings did not sit well with Shaw. If something had happened to any of those eight, surely someone could have gotten away and come racing back for help. But no one returned. It was possible that there were other survivors roaming these woods, and some of them may have detached from civility and morality and would harm others for a bit of food. They prepared for all scenarios.

Three miles beyond the river the fruit smells became stronger but with still no sign of anything or anyone.

At dawn they made camp in a clearing near a narrow stream teeming with crawfish that they caught and cooked in a pot over a campfire. They ate the freshwater crustaceans with gusto and then slept beneath a canopy of trees on a moonless pitch-black night.



Kayla awoke before the others. At first she was confused as to why she was unable to move, and then panic struck her like an ignited basket full of napalm and she thrashed about until she broke free. While they slept, long shoots stealthily came up from the ground and cocooned them within a network of roots. She awoke the others, using her knife to help cut them free. Luckily the shoots were thin and weakly bound, otherwise had they been thicker and stronger with a tighter weave, they all would have been in serious trouble. Now, the further they hiked, the more dangerous it would get, which sparked a reasonable debate as to whether they should turn back.

But Kayla would not consider it for a second. “I’m not going back until I find my husband.” Kayla’s chiseled features were set in a hard cast of strict determination. “So if any one of you wants to turn back, fine, go ahead, I’d do this alone if I have to. But, if it were any one of you out there, and you were hurt and needing help, I’d bet that you’d want someone to come for you.”

“She’s right,” Trish agreed, staring at the three men in their crew as if in challenge. “If something happened to me, I’d be terrified, and I’d want someone to come looking for me.” She reached for Kayla’s hand and squeezed it, giving her an assuring smile. “I’m going with you.” Trish had been Kayla’s closest friend ever since they first met in the Stagondo Valley six months ago. The Valley’s fields, surrounded by a small number of berry bushes, nut trees, and near a mineral rich spring, was one of only a few viable areas left where the mutation did not infect. However, the berry bushes and the nut trees were soon picked clean, and what little game they were able to take by trapping or hunting, along with the small amount of food rations the survivors salvaged before absconding to the Valley, did not last long for the hundreds of people who took refuge in the Valley. On the verge of starvation, everyone prepared to leave and take their chances elsewhere.

Then the fruit smells wafted in from the forest, drawing people into the woods in a desperate search for the source. Nearly half a mile from the Valley they crossed a shallow river, and just beyond it they came to a clearing with a small orchard filled with fruit ripe for the picking. Bags were filled and toted to the Valley and back again until the trees were picked clean. Overjoyed people greedily snatched the fruit and munched hungrily until their bellies were full and their hands and faces were sticky with juice.

For days thereafter, hunting and foraging took them deeper into the woods, only to come back with very little. And the emptier their bellies became, the more restless, agitated, and even ruthless and violent people got.

Having enough, many left, rallying others to join them. But many stayed, hopeful to have better luck in tracking the occasional deer, squirrel, or rabbit, and foraging small amounts of nuts and berries in the forest. But each search seemed to push them deeper into the woods, cutting new trails, and even camping in the woods for two or three days at a time whereupon each return their efforts showed less and less rewarding. Then one day a team of eight ventured out, expecting to be back in less than three days. That had now been seven days ago.

“I’m with you too,” Billy said, and even though he said it to Kayla, everyone knew that he’d meant it for Trish. It was no secret that Billy and Trish had a thing for each other, even though he was a bit shy and always kept his advances toward her on a clean, flirtatious level, which was a shame, because she really wished that he’d be a little more aggressive. This week she’d planned to take matters into her own hands, take it to the next level, but then this came up.

Joey, the fourth member of this crew, had been the one to voice concern about the danger of pressing on only because he felt obligated to do so. He was one of many scouts of the Valley, he’d already cut several trails in these woods and knew them well. The thought of willingly stepping closer toward imminent danger got his arm hairs to stand on end and his heart to racing, but being a true adrenaline junky and woodsman, he was game to push on.

That left one other: Shaw. Dark and broodish, with obvious but guarded intelligence, he was the official leader of their crew. The moment he arrived in the Valley, in an SUV loaded with hunting, fishing and survival gear, and a grandiose take charge attitude, his presence was felt by everyone. He quickly became one of the few who were responsible for the Valley’s good order and organization; he’d been one of the men who’d managed those who’d worked themselves into a panicked rage from lack of food. Many speculated his history, military was the rumor, but no one knew for sure, because although he was approachable, and everyone knew him only by his last name, he was not what anyone would consider openly social, which only strengthened the gossip of a supposed military background.

Shaw considered each one of the four standing before him. He saw worry and confusion, fear and anxiety, hope and determination. But if they only knew what he knew, hope and determination would not be anywhere near a part of their current emotional state. Which begged to question: What did he feel? How did he feel? And what did it matter anyway? It probably wouldn’t matter. He brushed the thought away and resignedly said, “If everybody’s up to it, then we go.”

They packed up their gear and pushed on.



It was around noon and for the past hour their trek had been a treacherous one. A steady rise and fall of uneven ground had taken a toll on them, and their heavy gear was weighing them down. At the base of a steep hill they were to ascend, they stopped to rest and snack on a handful of trailmix. Joey unslung his backpack and followed it to the ground, laying his back against it while shoveling the entire handful of nuts and berries issued to him into his mouth and closing his eyes for a quick nap. Trish and Billy relieved themselves of their gear, accepted their issue of trailmix, and then Trish suggested that she and Billy go scout a fifty yard perimeter of the area to see if there was anything to forage. Kayla sat a few feet away from Shaw, both nibbling their trailmix two and three nuts and berries at a time, savoring each bite before taking the next.

After a few bites, Kayla broke the silence and spoke. Shaw sat quietly as he ate, as if he wasn't hearing her, or perhaps just didn't care. Kayla did not mind; selfless and wise Valley Mother that she was, her compassion and concern for others over herself was a virtue admired and respected by many. Kayla would without hesitation lend a sympathetic ear and a comforting shoulder to lean on. She would console, advise, set at ease, or direct if need be, all the while withholding her own inner conflicts and grievances so to spare others the extra burden. Even with her own husband, with whom she loved deeply and adored immensely, she somehow was unable to open up completely and share her troubled feelings with. Except now, surprisingly enough, as she spoke to Shaw, or perhaps only the space between them, something happened inside her. She did not try to stop it, to hold back, as if she even could, she gave in to moment. (And in front of Shaw of all people!) Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as if under torrential buildup until the emotional purge filled her to bursting with such overwhelming elation that she was overcome with a fit of mad giggles.

The hysteria lasted only a minute. She wiped her face dry, regained her composure and was surprised at how peaceful she now felt. What's more was that she was even more surprised when she noticed that Shaw was not only looking right at her, but how concerned his eyes were set. He had been listening the entire time, he had held on to her every word, considered the unabashed humility of her sudden openness, and once he felt sure that she was fully recovered, he felt the unexplainable need to tell her something. Something that has been and will continue to haunt him forever.

His military rank granted him high level security clearance therefore he stood witness to most of what took place. The experiments, the groundbreaking beginning of what was to be a hopeful future that ultimately led to a devastating end.

He told her about the massive clearing of timberland worldwide. Lumber trees were dwindling in number, and with the replanting and growth return rate not meeting the industries high demand, the future was bleak. Hoping to remedy the problem, the Institute of Global Visions pushed billions of dollars into an extensive study of instant plant regeneration, using Cogongrass as the perfect specimen for experimentation. In dense stands, Cogongrass was a powerful vegetative force that altered forests and forged monocultures. It not only formed into thick mats of thatch and leaves that made it nearly impossible for native plants to survive, but it also burned hotter than native species. After a burn, a six to twelve inch deep rhizome network would send up new shoots, regenerating themselves as soon as a month after a fire. This resilience made it a severe

threat to forests, which gave botanists at the Institute the inspiration they'd been searching for. They were optimistic, expecting positive results they could work with, but what they got was something beyond all imagination.

They tried to contain it, they poisoned it, they burned it, but their experimental efforts had been such a success that the plant's regeneration process was instantaneous. It choked the life out of everything it covered.

And then it mutated.

It spliced into the surrounding plant life, creating hybrid forms, giant and miniscule, shaping its own floral environment.

"I might have been able to stop it," Shaw finally said, his dark, haunted gaze to the ground, "if only I had known."

Kayla was both angry and astounded. Up until now she, like the rest of the world, had not known the origin of the sudden plant mutation. It had happened so fast and without warning; cities were overgrown with vegetation; huge thorny vines twirled around and congested tall buildings, engulfing them entirely; streets and highways were covered under thick blankets of moss and brush. No one could come up with a reasonable explanation as to how this could have happened. But now it all made sense. We did this to ourselves. And Shaw had been carrying the guilt of firsthand knowledge and participation like a ton of lead ever since. Soon she found herself feeling sorry for him, and that overcame her anger. What good would pointing the finger do now? "Even if you had known," she said, "what could you have done? Anything shy of blowing up the entire Institute would have only gotten you fired, or arrested, and the Institute would have continued their work."

He brought his eyes back, looking her squarely in the face. "Believe this, since that day, in my mind, I've blown that place up a thousand times."

"So is that why you're so guarded while helping others, because you believe you had part in the disaster?"

Shaw set a direct eye on Kayla and said, "I'm guarded because that's just the way I am. And I help others, because that's just the way I am."

Kayla cracked a mirthless grin. "Good. Because it's not your fault that any of this happened, so quit thinking that it is. Okay?"

Shaw nodded wanly. "Okay."

"And I promise I won't go all boo hooey on you again too."

A halfhearted grin twitched on his lips. "Good. Because I don't think I can handle anything like that again."

"Touché," she retorted.

"There is something else I need to tell you about. There was a side experiment they were working on. Something that wasn't a part of their main agenda. Their first attempts were unsuccessful, but then they began to see mild reactions. They were splicing—"

Shaw was cut off by a madhouse scream piercing the silent forest.



A hundred yards from the hill's base Trish led Billy behind a thick tree where she pushed her body against his and kissed him. It took all but two stunned seconds for Billy's virtuous restraint to dissolve and his mouth to match the same passionate urgency as hers. Weeks filled with long days of visual longing, and even longer nights of lonely reflection, had built inside them a lustful ache now bursting at the seams and neither wasted a second longer in allowing their hungry hands to roam freely over each other's bodies. Before long, they were slipping off shirts and shucking pants.

Trish anchored her arms onto Billy's shoulders and hiked up a leg. Billy hooked an arm under her thigh and entered her. Their mouths stayed locked together as they slid against each other, chest to chest. Billy's back rubbed against the rough bark of the tree, but he was not conscious of it; neither one was conscious of anything but of each other, this very moment of unrestrained primal lust, all else was moot. Otherwise had they been conscious of their surroundings they might have seen the ground move just feet away from them.

Billy's thrusting grew harder but not hard enough. Or deep enough for that matter. He wanted more. He withdrew, releasing her leg, and turned her toward the tree. Understanding what he wanted, she happily obliged. Leaning forward, she hugged the tree and arched her back, her ass poked out and up and he entered her from behind.

The movement on the ground inched closer.

Billy slid his hands up the smooth skin of her sides, cupping her breasts and giving them a nice squeeze before sliding his hands back down where he dug his fingers into her hips as he pounded into her. His breath was ragged. Her moans escalated. Both were on the teetering edge of orgasm. . . and then Trish felt Billy suddenly withdraw. At first she was hit with heated frustration. *She was so friggin' close, and then he decides to pull out!* Then she thought that it was probably for the best, pregnancy was definitely discouraged right now.

But when she turned to face him. . .

She instantly learned that his pulling out had not been a choice that he willfully made. Long vines, thick and thin alike, were wrapping themselves around Billy's head and body like greedy snakes. The vines' serrated skin sawed into his flesh like a steak knife to butter as it wrapped him entirely and then tightened down.

Trish screamed.

And then she ran.



Kayla and Shaw shot to their feet, instinctively reaching for their machetes and pistols, and ran toward the scream. Joey roused from his sleep and hastily followed.

Trish collided into Kayla. Naked and hysterical, Trish pointed back toward the area from where she came. Kayla held her close and tried to calm her down while Shaw cautiously approached the area, wielding a machete in one hand and a pistol in the other. Joey followed his lead. They came around a big tree with clothes scattered on the ground but there was no sign of Billy anywhere. They collected the discarded clothes and rejoined the women.

Trish was so shaken that she needed Kayla's help to put her clothes back on. Once she was dressed, Kayla held her by the shoulders and gently asked her, "What happened to Billy?"

Within minutes, terror aged Trish's pretty face ten years. Her bottom lip trembled when she spoke. "These . . . v-v-vines wrapped around him and c-c-cut into him. I-I-" she broke into a fit of sobs, unable to finish. Kayla pulled her close and held her tight.

None of them would say it, only because of how pointless they knew it would be, but their silent, wide-eyed stares at each other, and then at the forest surrounding them, spoke volumes for the fear-induced anger they were suddenly struck with. Unfortunately, a degree of doubt also crept in to fester under their skin; they could be searching for ghosts.

Shaw did not allow it to fester long. He said, "From now on, no one leaves the other's sight. We stay together at all times."

They retrieved their gear and ascended the hill.



The hilltop leveled out to a dense stand of trees and briars but the narrow path cut by previous Valley hunters and foragers made the trek through the thicket easier. Eventually the denseness of the forest opened up and they didn't need to mind their steps so much. An hour in Joey voiced a pee break and Kayla said that she could use one too. Trish partnered with Kayla, and Shaw partnered with Joey, both pairs only yards away from each other but far enough to afford sufficient privacy.

Joey went beside a tree; tilting his head back, closing his eyes, he shuddered, as it felt nearly orgasmic. Kayla squatted next to a tree with her rump hidden behind it. She had a little trouble at first, she could be pee shy sometimes, but once she was able to relax and let go the first couple of dribbles, she peed like an open faucet.

It came from above, amidst the canopy of leaves, descending stealthily alongside the tree and to the ground where it curled up beneath the downpour of urine. It flinched impulsively at the sudden warmth and wetness, reared back into a rattlesnake-like recoil, and then struck with such force that it buried itself half a yard into the genitalia before flexing, tripling its girth and popping out its thorns.

Joey's eyes shot open, and when he looked down and saw what had forced itself into his urethra, and the excruciating pain that followed, a scream came out of him that threatened to bust his lungs. He grabbed the vine with both hands in a desperate attempt to yank it out, only for him to meet instant agony. Its thorns had locked itself in, allowing it to move inward inch by inch but when pulled outward, it shredded his insides.

Shaw unsheathed his machete, and as if the vine sensed the danger, it burrowed in a foot deeper, flexed once more, doubling its size and ripping Joey's penis apart, then snatching Joey up into the shroud of leaves above, leaving his dying scream as the only traces of his ever being there.

Trish's mouth gaped in muted terror. Her body twitched, trembled, then shook uncontrollably. It was all too much for her, she wanted to get away from it all, from this world, from everything. She wanted to run out of her mind and go somewhere else, somewhere like it once was, and if she were able to run fast enough then maybe she could get herself there before anything else could catch her. Vaguely she heard her name being

called, but even that she wanted to get away from, her name, her everything that was here in this world.

When her lungs started to burn and her legs started to wobble she slowed to a stop. In her frantic run, she'd been mindless to the transition of her wooded surroundings, but once she caught her breath and began to focus again, she noticed a big difference in the area she was now in. Lusher, brighter with more color, nearly prehistoric, and the fruit smells were intoxicating. Bushes wrought with huge berries of all colors. Plants with leaves so fat they could pass for playground slides. The forest floor was carpeted with thick bladed emerald colored grass. In some shaded areas were mats of moss so dark it looked blue. Several trees were nearly identical to each other, with two separate trunks conjoining perfectly a few feet from the ground and then separating a few feet further up into three boughs that grew twigs from their ends. But this identical growth wasn't the oddest part about them, it was their surface color and texture. The trees weren't typical brown or gray, they were beige, and some were nearly white, and the texture appeared to be smooth. She came up to one of the trees to run her fingers across it, finding that it was not only smooth but sickly soft. And then the area she touched twitched reflexively under her hand. Startled, she snatched her hand back and stepped away from the tree.

The other trees would have looked normal had it not been for the bulbous fruit that hung from their limbs. The fruit was a ripe purplish red, and when she stepped beneath one to get a closer look, it quivered and then slowly trisected at its end. The pulpy skin peeled back and a small tongue-like tube protruded from inside it. A second later something shot out of the tube and pierced her neck.

Struck with panic, she reached up and pulled out of her neck a needle-like object a couple of inches long and barbed at the end. Though the sting was not harsh, the reality of what happened was, and she was instantly angry with herself. How stupid she was to've ran, like a scared little girl running away from the boogie monster. Except she'd also ran away from the only two people out here that could keep her safe from something far worse than any childhood nightmare.

She turned to shoot out the same way she came in a naïve attempt to try to outrun what was surely to be an ill fate, thinking that maybe she could at least get to Kayla and Shaw in time to warn them. But when she was faced with the other side of the odd beige colored tree she observed moments before, she soon realized what had happened to the other eight, and what was in store for herself. If she were able to, life draining despair would have allowed her to fall to her knees, but she was not even able to do that, her legs had already stiffened.



Kayla and Shaw chased after Trish until Shaw's foot sank into a small, grass covered hole, twisting his ankle. Kayla stopped to help him, and her heart dropped as she watched Trish disappear deeper into the woods.

“Are you okay?”

Shaw winced when he rotated his foot. “I think I sprained it is all.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Kayla helped him stand up and he eased a little pressure on to his foot. He was able to hobble at a fair pace but that was it.

They went in the direction Trish had gone and within minutes they found themselves surrounded by plant and tree oddities unlike anything they'd ever seen. Cautious and ever mindful of the dense shrubbery above and beyond, they were ready to strike with their drawn machetes at anything that attacked.

A moment later they saw Trish in the distance standing next to a tree. They hollered out to her but she did not respond. As they approached her they felt something was not right; she looked strange, different somehow, the way she stood fully erect, unmoving, catatonic, with her arms outstretched as if in praise to the tree before her. Then they came right up to her and understood.

Or at least Shaw did.

“Oh no,” Shaw said deflatedly. “I can't believe it. It's actually happening?”

“What?” Kayla said, her voice trembling. “What's happening?”

“The side experiment I was telling you about, the one they were unable to fully develop. They were trying to splice plant nuclei with. . .” He trailed off.

“With what?” Kayla pleaded.

Finally, Shaw said, “Human DNA.”

Kayla slowly panned the area around them, taking a thorough observation of the trees, noticing the significant differences between the beige one and those that bare hundreds of purplish red fruit surrounding them. She touched the tree Trish stood next to and was appalled to feel a fleshy texture, and was further disgusted when it twitched from the touch of her hand. She did not want to, afraid of what she would see, but she reluctantly carried her eyes upward anyway. . . and then wished she hadn't.

The obscene stretch and rapid growth had caused a gross amount of deformity, but nevertheless, the features were still there; the elongated sockets where the eyes once were, the nostrils, the gaping maw of a mouth, they were all there. She took another look around at the other similar trees, counting them off – eight in all.

Unable to hold herself together any longer, she collapsed to the ground and dug her fingers into the grass, snatching up handfuls and cursing the very dirt.

The leaves from the surrounding trees shook to no wind. . . the shrubbery flexed. . . the moss crawled. . .

Shaw snatched up the machete lying at Kayla's side and wielded both his and hers, scanning the area around them, ready for what may come.

. . . and the bulbous fruit quivered above.