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The Blue Forest

I sat on the bench outside the room. The cold air seeped in from the outside and ate away at my breath— at my soul. The light shining from beneath the door was the only thing that kept me from slipping into the darkness surrounding me. But, maybe it was in this darkness that I could accept what may be occurring on the other side of that door. These thoughts scared me, so I turned to look out the window to take my mind away. I saw snowflakes gracefully fall toward the ground. They drifted lazily, letting the breeze guide them to where they belonged. But now my guiding wind lay on the opposing side of the door with icicles clinging to its breath. So I no longer drifted about. Now I lay on the ground, broken into **fragments** of ice and regret. I sighed, a single frozen tear rolling down my face as I looked out at the trees whipping back and forth in the storm. Why did I not come home sooner?

The light from the door went dark as a figure stood on the other side, twisting the handle. From the other side emerged my aunt Sylvie. Sylvie's face was usually set in hard lines. They didn't even crack when her husband passed. When she stood in the doorway with puffy, red-ringed eyes, I knew.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said, her voice cracking like a scratched record,

“What do you have there?” she pointed at the paper flower I made for my mom in art class today.

“A **Hydrangea**, you know that was your mother’s favorite flower,” she continued.

Was? And with that sentence, my suspicions were confirmed— she had passed, and it was all my fault. The flower fell from my grasp and hit the floor with a booming whisper that rang in my ears.”. Sylvie could see I knew what had happened and grasped me tight.

“Oh, sweetheart, I am so sorry, baby girl.” I could feel her tears falling on my neck, but her neck was dry. I didn’t cry. I stood there, icicles formed in my lungs, my lips turned blue, and my hands turned numb. My guiding wind had frozen to death.

I was walking down that familiar road, the snow crushing beneath my feet. On either side of me was the woods. The world was covered in a white duvet with a forest green sheet peeking out. I could see my house in the distance. A modest house, its dark red shingles covered in icicles. I heard one kid in school talk about an unsolved homicide case suspected to be caused by an icicle falling off a roof and impaling someone. He told me the ice melted, so no murder

weapon was found. *That can't be true, can it?* I suppose it was an intriguing idea to find someone dead and never know the cause. My teacher disliked when I talked about death and murder at school, but I couldn't help it. I find the subject so fascinating. It even makes me want to be a detective when I grow up, like Sherlock Holmes. I remember when I was at Auntie Sylvie's house, and she had a massive collection of Sherlock Holmes books. I read half of them in one sitting, and I remember begging mom to get one of those goofy hats with the two brims. I took the hat out of my backpack and put it on. I saw some icicles hanging off a tree. I went up to the tree and picked one of them off. "By Jove Watson, I found the murder weapon. It appears that this icicle has impaled our victim!" I took the icicle and plunged it toward my chest, making croaking noises as I fell backward into the snow. My hat flew off, and the snow crunched beneath me as I hit the ground. "Ehhhhhhh," I groaned as I lay on the ground dead and then began to laugh at my own silliness. I looked around for my hat but couldn't find it. Panic stirred in my chest. I sat up and dusted the snow off my pants. I wandered deeper into the woods to look for it. "There you are," I said, reaching down. A bright light flashed by my eyes, and I stumbled backward. My hat was clutched in my hands. I looked around to see what it was and where it went, but I couldn't find it. I glanced at my *Adventure Time* wristwatch. *Oh crap, it's 6:30. I should get back home.* I threw my hat on my head and rushed back home, submerged in **twilight**.

"Mom! Mom! I'm home!" No answer. I walked into the kitchen while dusting snow off my jacket. There was a pot on the stove that was still warm. "Mom?" I called out again. I looked out into the hallway to see the back door swinging in the wind. I walked over and looked out into the world of white. At this point, the green sheet had been completely covered. But in the distance, I saw two dark blobs emerge as if they had just appeared on the other side of a portal. Something was off about them. They were looking down at something. As they approached, I

realized who these two figures were: my aunt Sylvie and our next-door neighbor. My stomach lurched when I understood what lay on the snow between them.

“Oh sweetie, it’s not your fault, it’s not your fault.” Fault. This word broke me from my frozen state and filled me with a burning heat of rage toward myself. “FAULT! Not my fault?!” It was my fault. “She went looking for me! She wouldn’t have been out there if it wasn’t for me! So don’t you dare tell me it’s not my fault!” She attempted to say something, but I could see in her eyes that she knew the truth. It was my fault. I was busy pretending to be the detective when I was the killer. Sylvie reached out to embrace me again, but I could not stand to be in her presence anymore. I pushed her out of the way and burst out of the back door. The word rang in my ears as I ran into the woods, tears wicked away from my face like raindrops clinging to a car window going down the highway. *Fault. Fault. FAULT.* It rang in my ears like the bells of a grandfather clock.

Having lost my guiding wind, the snow was in chaos. Thousands of tiny needle-like pins pressed into my cheeks. The world was blurry, like when you first opened your eyes underwater. I continued running forward when I heard it-- like a **bolt** of lightning streaking across the sky. It was a booming sound that filled the whole forest. *CRACK!* I fell forward, my face full of snow. It muffled the screaming. I felt dizzy and lightheaded, nauseous from the pain. I twisted my body to look at what had happened. Out of the fog extended a tree root. It was curved like the sickle of the grim reaper. My foot must have gotten caught on the root, and... Nausea curled up my throat at the thought. I tried to get up and put pressure on my foot, but the pain was too immense. I collapsed on the ground, sobbing. “Mom. Mom, I am so sorry. Please, Mom, come back. Mom, I

am so scared. Please come help me!” I lay in the freezing wind, wrapped in the white duvet that covers the world, sobbing and wishing to wake up and find this is only a dream.

The forest was still. No birds were chipping, no wind was blowing through the trees, not even the faint sound of trees creaking under the weight of snow. It was as if the entire world itself had frozen in time. I gazed around in the pitch black to see if I could get my bearings. Nothing but darkness surrounded me. I began to feel like I did when I was waiting outside the door. I could feel the darkness consuming me like before. I felt a shadow crawl up my belly and slither down my throat. My lungs began to freeze again as the darkness constricted itself around my body, shortening my breath. I wanted to cry out but could only let out short gasps. I heard the word begin to echo through the forest. *Fault. Fault. Fault.* It sounded like buzzing nats in my head. I squeezed my eyes tight and clutched my head in my hands. “No. No. NO! leave me alone!” And the forest was still again. The darkness had gone. My lungs were no longer frozen. In fact, they felt warm. My whole body felt warm. I opened my eyes. In front of me floated a ball of pure blue light. My heart began to beat at the same rate as the pulsing blue orb. The ball was made of a swirling vortex of cool colors, and in its center was an iridescent amber. We both stood there in the silent forest, marveling at each other.

I raised my hand and reached out toward the light—toward the warmth. It began to drift away into the darkness. “No, wait, come back!” I pleaded. As it drifted, so did the warmth it emitted. I tried to lift my body up from the ground. My ankle was numb from the cold. I felt a twinge of pain, but it was bearable. I limped toward the orb as it began to drift away again. I continued to follow the ball of light until we arrived at a clearing. The forest was now shrouded in a blue haze. Surrounding the forest was a dense layer of purple foliage with streams of arctic blue light emerging from the gaps in the brush. The smell of honey and vanilla permeated the air.

The purple foliage was hydrangeas. Cutting through the middle of this clearing was a stream of soft blue light. Situated next to the stream was a single ghostly white tree. Its branches extended like fingers reaching to the sky. Attached to each finger was a lantern rocking back and forth like the tree itself was cradling it. Inside each lantern was an orb similar to the one I had followed to arrive at this place. Each lantern contained a different ball of light. Some were bright orange and looked as if they encapsulated the sun itself, while others held blue orbs. At the base of the trees was a prominent node. From the center of this node emitted a captivating orange glow as a soft nightlight. It almost looked like the tree was carrying an embryo of sunlight. On the other side of the embankment, there was a burning fire. Its warmth called me. As I approached the fire, a voice called out to me from out of the shadows.

“What brings you here, dear child?”

My voice stoppered in my throat. I didn't answer, taken aback by the sudden voice. Her voice was warm like the fire. As she spoke, a warming sensation trickled from my stomach to the tips of my fingers and toes. The warmth made me feel as if I was **floating**.

“You're Injured. Dip your ankle into the stream, sweet child. It will heal you,” the voice continued.

I limped to the stream's edge and removed my shoe and sock. I took a deep breath and gently dipped my ankle in the water. The warmth wrapped around my toes as the darkness had curled in my chest, but I didn't feel cold this time; I was warm. The sensation continued to crawl up my foot until it reached my ankle. The warmth collected near where the bone had broken and emitted a large pool of light under the surface of my skin. The light shined for a moment and

then dissipated. I removed my foot from the stream and moved my ankle around. I was astonished, not a twinge of pain.

“How does your ankle feel now, child?” the voice asked.

“Better now. Thank you,” I finally replied.

“You must be freezing. Let us go to the fire.”

Upon approaching the fire, the ball of light that I followed to this strange forest glided in from the fog. The orb transformed from an iridescent ball of light to an enchanting lunar moth. I reached out my hand, and she landed on my finger as gently as a snowflake landing on the ground. Her wings looked as if they were made of emerald-colored glass. Placed on the back of the wings were two ever-seeing eyes. The eyes stared at me with no remorse, unblinking, unwavering. Her antenna wiggled back and forth at me as if to say hello.

“I see you have already met Tski,” said the voice. The voice belonged to a shadowy figure with blazing blue eyes that stared at you with the intense heat of an iron **forge**. Shrouding the face of the voice was a flaming orange cowl that imprinted her presence against the blue fog that filled the forest.

“I have yet to introduce myself. I am Nissa, guardian of The Blue Forest and Keeper of **Lost Dreams**.”

“I am Ramona. It’s nice to meet you, and thank you for healing me,” I said.

“I didn’t heal you, Ramona, the forest did, and the forest is also the one who sent Tski to seek you,” she replied,

“If you are here, that means that you have lost something very dear to your heart.” she continued.

A gentle breeze blew through the clearing carrying the scent of hydrangeas as it passed.

A tear rolled down my cheek and burned away as it landed in the fire.

“What have you lost, dear child?” she asked sincerely. More tears began to roll down my cheeks and fizzle in flames.

“My mother.” I finally choked out.

“Death is like **thieves in the night**. It comes without warning. I am sorry for your loss,” she said. I picked one of the hydrangeas surrounding the fire and clutched it towards my chest.

“I am so sorry,” I whispered.

“What are you sorry for, Ramona?” Nissa asked. I looked at her with tears rolling down my face like a receding **tide**.

“It’s all my...If I had come home earlier... if I hadn’t gone into the woods... she wouldn’t be...” I can’t bring myself to say the words out loud. Nissa stared at me, her eyes unwavering at my fragmented state.

“I see what haunts you, child. It lives in your shadow and creeps up your belly,” she said.

“But only you can stop this. Only you can wake from this nightmare,” she continued.

“I feel so cold inside. My lungs are frozen like they’re on the verge of shattering,” I cried, “I just want warmth! I just want to be held by her again! I just want to wake up from this nightmare!” the words tore from my throat. I flung them with such vitriol that they burned. Out from the shadows, I heard the word begin to echo again. *Fault, fault, fault, fault, fault. FAULT, FAULT, FAULT, FAULT, FAULT.* The words ricocheted around my head like a .22 bullet.

“Please leave me alone!” I screamed, clutching my hands to my ears. But still, the words ring in my head. I felt my body begin to freeze again. The shadow crawled up my back and around my neck.

“NO! I will not endure this nightmare anymore! I shouted as I took a burning stake from the fire and plunged it into my chest, just as I had done with the icicle in the woods.

At once, I felt the flames consume my body, a warm liquid ran down my chest from where the stake had entered. So warm. I felt warm. My skin felt warm. My chest felt warm. It was like an embrace from my mother. With her gentle touch, the shadow that haunted me burst into flames; the ringing stopped and was replaced with its screams of agony. My body felt as if it was floating, wrapped in my mother’s benevolent embrace. She was there with me, whispering to me softly until I fell asleep in her arms.

As the flames consumed her, Ramona dissolved into ash. Her soul ignited into a blazing orb of amber with an iridescent ice-blue center. It flickered and danced like the same flames that had devoured her. Nissa conjured an empty soul lantern and placed her inside. She gently hung the soul lantern near the base of the tree next to an equally bright soul.

“They deserve to be together, don't you think, Tski?” Nissa said as a single smoldering tear fell down her face. The two lanterns hung there, engulfing each other in a warm embrace, swinging on a breeze that carried the scent of honey and vanilla.