



Forest Home
Ryan C. Scott

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When You Find a Home

Sitting in the coming dawn, his small frame reflected his disposition. He stared and watched the tiny bug make its way across the surface of the leaf. He envied it and pitied it. Unburdened by the knowledge of its place in the forest it could just exist. So pure.

The cool, moist morning air meandered over the hillside, losing its place among the vanishing shadows as morning took hold. An errant drop of water landed on his damp shoulder.

"I miss being lost here"

Despite his small stature, he had never felt a vulnerability like he did now. Caring about his new home had made the blight consuming it terrifying. He couldn't remember the last rest he had felt.

In the night Gus made his way through the glade and the stifled moonlight played with his keen eyes. He had hurried his pace and his stride found a root that pulled him from his feet. He scrambled up to collect himself as a thorny branch wrapped his thigh and pulled him towards the darkness. He struggled with the hilt of his sword. Grasping it finally he freed himself with a thrust, dodging branches serving as limbs. The corruption of the forest's love.

"Awww I liked those trousers."

Such an inane thought to cross his mind as he stabbed to the heart of the monster. All day, every day, this death that resembled the type of savaging of the living lands that '*Civilized*' men seemed driven to pulled at him. Dragging down his spirits. Like apparitions in ghost tales where the monster takes the form of a loved one or heroic ancestor in order to play on the mind. His enemy brought it's evil in the form of the greatest and most beloved mechanisms Gus had ever known. He stabbed and stabbed again. The tendrils still weak; "Sapplings" was his melancholy thought. While he hated comparing these beasts to the beautiful children of his lands, it was still an effective way to think about them.

He looked out across a clearing and caught himself in fond memories of weeks past where *that* had been the front line in this war. They came from everywhere now.

His trained eye saw the underbrush around a circling of trees for what it was and he ran to hurry past it. The brush rising up as he passed revealed itself as the monsters hiding in plain sight. Diving past two of them as they merged into what looked as a wall of dead branches, he passed 3 more that peeled themselves from tree trunks. A human visage one moment, still like the dead forest the next. They lumbered towards him. Vacant places for eyes.

"I wonder if they had eyes, but the eyes fell out, but it turned out they didn't actually need them?"

Running now at a sprint, his tiny legs working the surface of the forest floor, he made his way to the faint dog-worn path that led to his destination. The corruption of his beloved forest would have to claim his body as its own some other day.

Crossing down from the hardened earth to a slope of lush, rich soil thick with ferns still holding onto the dewy morning, Gus' path took him through the well kept, somehow perpetually disheveled looking garden of his friend. Just beyond; a mound of branches, moss, and earth. To a wanderer's eyes, the home wouldn't look like anything more than its parts, aside from looking a bit conspicuous to have such a large lump sticking up from the forest floor.

"Hey Calen! I think they're not behind me anymore, well I mean they're behind me but far enough to say that they're not, does that make sense?" He called and stopped to take a breath. He had assumed Calen would be here, as they had planned a tenday ago, but he always moved at his own pace.

The door to the hovel opened and three beautiful white dogs came ran out to greet him.

"Guys! Hello! I have all of the pets, guys. I'll pet you up a bunch." As Gus worked to ensure that each dog had a thorough turn, he checked their fur for parasites, poison plant pods, the works. He would never tell them he was doing this, because he didn't want to alarm them, but he liked to think that they knew he was looking out for them. He also liked to believe them to be mighty wolves that had been tamed by the love of the forest. However everyone was aware that they were very much just *dogs*; mutts even.

"Where's Calen guys? We might have to do some work right now if the twiggies followed me. Or didn't *stop* following me. You know what I mean, *don't you?*" He ended with the type of tone city humans can't help but use with dogs. "*Who's a little champion?*" "*Who's a good girl?*"

"When did I start doing that? Or *why?*"

"You're probably just a short human and don't know it." A lanky man emerged from the hovel, a gnarled, polished branch in his hand. Some people can seem like they're wearing more flowing cloth and robes than they could possibly be wearing, and the young druid looked much the same. His tall frame swimming in simple fabric. His beard had gone gray almost as soon as it started to grow. He looked to Gus rather distinguished; making Gus think he had answers that he himself did not.

The man smirked. A memory of practicing that very smile came and left him in an instant, followed by a twinge of shame; the type of shame that comes along with asinine vanity such as practicing a smile.

"What was following you?"

"5 of the tall ones." Gus said as he straightened his tiny body. He took opportunity of the reminder of circumstances of his arrival to take stock of his weapons. He

patted and groped the places he kept his tools and looked up at Calen when he was sure he was prepared.

"It was a ways back though. I doubt they continued to follow me."

Remembering his thirst, he pulled from a waterskin at his waist. The dogs swirled around the two of them. Gus thought about how blissfully they could enjoy the little moments of light between the dark.

"They've crossed the glade now Calen. What do we do?"

A weary look was all he could muster. Any number of lies came to him in an instant. Heroic and wonderful sounding lies. "I don't know friend. I don't know." The honesty spilled from him before he could catch himself. Hope had become a lie he wasn't able to stomach anymore. "They'll overrun us soon. We'll be drowned in their shadows if we don't leave."

Gus swayed on his feet a little. He didn't like the truth any more than Calen, but in his own weary soul, he knew that there wasn't a lie on the face of this world, the planes, or any other place that would lessen the sorrow.

He walked over to the garden and pulled a carrot from the ground, brushed it off and started to chew at it. He closed his eyes and focused on the act. He thought about every little motion. Every little taste. When he opened his eyes, he was staring down at a tiny bell pepper on the vine. Perfectly shaped, an exact replica of a full-grown pepper, but no bigger than the size of a coin. A sad, wide smile crept onto his face. He remembered the wonder of the forest in an instant.

One of the dogs interrupted his epiphany as she slammed bodily into him in an attempt to illicit any and all affection. It made him laugh for a moment.

Gus took a few steps further into the garden with his eyes towards where he had last seen his enemy. He saw now that this, this corruption, this blight on the land was indeed his *enemy*. Not merely a threat, but *his enemy*.

The warm smile that made its way onto Calen's face dissipated as Gus' stare remained fixed.

"Calen." His gaze went to the forest canopy. "I won't leave the forest."

"I know friend, but we'll have to if we can't push it back past the glade..."

"Calen," Gus turned his sad eyes to his friend "I won't leave the forest."

They sat in silence for a moment, waiting for any sign that the enemy had not given up their pursuit.

To Stand

In dire moments stating the obvious can be a way to stave off the fear. To claim some ownership over it. Calen would see himself as combatant and no victim. "Our chances are slim friend."

"Yeah." The golden sunlight drew Gus into the moment. "At least it's a nice day. Some days are probably better to die on than others I'd guess."

Calen handed a spool of fine silver thread to Gus. Hairlike strands finer and stronger than he had ever seen. He held it between his eyes and the light of the sun. Gleaming, varied bright shapes playing out across it and through the grip of it in his small weathered hands.

"It's pretty."

"In these years your mind has never truly revealed itself to me friend." He lifted his head and tried to draw in the air of the bit unspoiled land surrounding them. "I'll be happy to have my body join the forest, but I've no love for these moments leading to that time." He pulled at his robes to straighten them. He stared out after the path he would take. Looking to the sky, judging the hour. "It's time for us now."

Calen crouched and placed his palms to the ground. Fingers splayed into the fine dirt, he adjusted them, configured them into the shapes the earth spoke to him, in a language Gus could imagine, but not hear. Calen's breathing came steady, and in time turned to a hissing sort of hum. A rhythm presented itself and Calen moved his body to it in slow, sure pulses. Pressing at the earth in time, a circle of smooth green light emanated from the ground around him. When he rose, the light remained. The circle was clear, but soft. Like the edge of a leaf; at once sharp and soft in a stark relief only nature can provide.

He took his staff and stuck it firm in the middle of the glyph. Gus wrapped a portion of the silvery thread around it as he had been instructed. His hands tingled with life.

His fixation on the coil in his hand was broken by a hand on his shoulder.

"I hope to see you soon friend." Calen stared down into his bright eyes. Lingering there for a moment was all either of them could do to acknowledge the weight each felt in their hearts.

"Me too. See you soon, Calen."

As they turned to leave, Gus looked back to his friend picking his way over to the path leading out into darkness. He turned and took to a light run. Time was not something they had much of, but he needed to be mindful to keep prepared, in body and spirit, for the night to come.

With the remaining sunlight Gus and Calen set out along their separate paths deeper into the forest.

As Gus ran, pulling the silver cord taut behind him, the little light to penetrate the canopy of the forest turned deeper hues of orange and red. The sight of white fur through the brush was more than welcomed.

"Heya girl!" for a moment his mood was as light as ever, remembering the days when the two of them had run through the forest just like this.

He arrived at the first of his objectives. A slate colored stone covered in moss and lichen. He slid to a stop.

"Oh OK just real quick." He reached down for a moment to scratch the dog's chin and pull on her ears the way she liked.

He snapped back to the task at hand and wrapped the stone several times before running off down another path. In this way he would make his way back to the glyph and complete the circle.

This path wound before him, level and twisting through the dense cover of the trees.

Gus ventured deeper into the shadows and the air grew still and cold.

The blanket of leaves seemed to shimmer as by an unfelt breeze. The darkness seemed to ripple as words formed from nowhere; from everywhere.

"I'll take it all from you little one" the dream like whisper trailed off into the darkness. A concert of faint voices echoing across the forest floor. "By all means stay though... I'll be happy to have your soul. The struggle is sweet to me. All of you small animals desperate to live, crying out against the inevitability of my complete victory."

Gus' voice shook "Why? What do you want with me?"

Slow laughter rose up from the ground in sickening rhythm. *"Hahahahaha... Aaaaaahhhhhh... Yesssss... It's rare my victims entertain me so. You need a clearer illustration? I will take your blood to the soil and the offspring will rise up to serve my will and my will alone."*

The sound of rustling leaves came from everywhere. As life reaches to the warmth of the sun, so did these dark tendrils reach out to Gus. Fine black sprouts stood up like fine hairs on the ground at his feet. Bending and arcing, groping to find him. Those that found his feet crept over his boots, probing ever crevice searching for a way inside. Gus tried to take it all in. Shifting his weight the foul cilia animated. Those that had lost his touch twirled and shook; those that had found it worked to cover what they could.

A growl behind him broke him free from the entrancing dance of the corruption. The white dog bared its teeth. Low viscious growls, hackles raised. In an instant the dark forest was alive. Humanoid forms seemed to surround the dog. Glancing back, he saw them everywhere. Tall as men, shambling forward. One brought down a heavy arm onto the dog as she lept aside and locked her jaw onto the creatures leg. At her back another raised a beam of an arm high to crush her.

"NOOO!" In an eye blink Gus knocked and let loose two arrows into the head of the beast, felling it. *"Long enough to get away"* he thought. His fearless companion maneuvered to the fallen monster and her sharp teeth tore its throat free. Before the other mindless form could strike her, Gus brought his shortsword around hard, severing pieces of its leg which were bearing weight. As it toppled

it continued the motions of combat. Like a tinker toy. A frightening and twisted plaything.

"Girl, come!" he cried out as he and the dog sprinted through the woods, dodging branches both alive and dead, both animated and still. "Where's Calen girl?! Go to Calen!"

"HAahahahahaahahaha... yesssss... *Exaaactly.* " the voices rose in their strange unison again. "You are perfect prey little one. The gods may hate you, but you still have use to me." The patchwork of sickened life around him brought the voice forward. Not quite surrounded, but no clear source.

Speeding through the forest he felt resistance against the uncoiling silver spool. It was spilling out faster than he was running. *They're pulling it off of me. No. No, please...* He ran to his next goal and let off some slack. He wrapped the great tree trunk as fast he could and pulled it taught and secure ran on.

The dog stopped and looked for him to join her. "GO GIRL, GO!" She sped off and he lost sight of her amidst the dark of the trees.

A bend in the path later, the coil was exhausted, it's shimmering form lying there in the path. There was nothing he could do. He took a moment to stare blankly at it. It could not be their salvation.

As the options became fewer and fewer, his future came into focus, and a wave of calm and resolve swept over him.

Let what must happen happen, then. I'm ready.

He turned and ran off towards the glade. Rain began to fall. Drops making their way through the tops of the trees.

The forest darkened and the rain increased. Moonlight, defuse and unable to penetrate the canopy in full brought a faint glow to the underbrush. Gus slowed to a walk to take it all in. The rain had matted his hair down and brought a constant stream of water across his eyes. His mind raced to make work of his senses. Everything and nothing moved. Distant thunder. The sound of wind that could not be felt within the confines of the forest. There was motion on the floor. He knew what it was. Days before he could have allowed himself the lie that it was just his imagination, but he knew that the monsters were everywhere. His home had become theirs. Afterall, who could truly claim sovereignty over the land?

Gus slowed his pace to a deliberate walk, drew and leveled his bow out into the dim forest. Two emerged from tree trunks and he let loose arrows. They staggered for a moment and Gus rushed down the path, sliding into a stop and turning to fire twice more. Falling to the ground the shapes were once again a part of the forest.

The rain worsened still. A limb swung down at him from his right and he ducked and rolled forward from where he knew his attacker must be. Kneeling he spun around and his arrows found their marks. Leaving the trail up a sloping, ivy

cover hillside, he knocked two more arrows as he had been taught so long ago. Memories came fast as he made his way through the night. *Dying might be really exciting I guess.* He thought of arriving to the forest. Finding his home there among the valens. Calen. The dogs. The monsters they had purged from the fine land. *Everything has its place* had been his father's mantra. He had meant the assembling of grand machines, *but what could be more grand a machine than nature?* His father had not understood him, and many years and miles separated them now, but Gus knew that he had been right. No, not at the time, but when thoughts of walking these same trails and feeling the sensations of a home that had eluded him. *May you find a home* was what his father had said to him, fighting back tears and a disappointment that had wracked him with guilt.

A vine wrapped his ankle. He drew his sword and cut himself free, sheathing it again afterward. He turned in time to see the thick branch catch him in the chest and knock him backwards to the ground. The momentum dragged him across the ground and the adreneline turned it into a roll back kneeling. White knuckles gripped his bow as he retrieved his stolen breath. The shambling figure made its way to him. A passionless murder its only goal. Gus's arrow went wide. He drew his sword again as a blow from behind threw him to the ground. His feet were bound in vine and he hit the ground hard. Cutting his right foot free, he rolled to his back to miss the killing blow meant for him; a trunk stomped down to where his body had been. Leaping to his feet, still partially bound, he drove his weapon to the beasts throat and it pulled free from his hands as his grip failed him. In a flash of lightning he saw it there, protruding awkwardly out into the night from the monster's body. He drew an arrow from his quiver and thrust it like a dagger into the darkness. Through the rain and wind he could hear it stumbling and falling down into the ivy.

Lightning flashed again and he found his sword hilt and wrenched the weapon free once again. Readied, he pressed on. The flashing light made the rain shine. Each time showed his enemies closer still. Marionetts. Always closer. He realized his arm was cut. His cloak and shirt torn to expose the bleeding flesh. He screamed. A scream to let the world know that his work was not abandoned in the last moments of his life. A scream unheard by any but his killers. "C'MON! I'M READY!"

Lightning broke through the security of the trees, shattering an ancient tree and the nearest monster. Smoke and smoldering ash mixed with the rain and wind. Lightning again tore down into the trees, sundering everything from the world where it touched the land.

"I'M READY!"

The storm grew wild. Flashes of lightning broke the darkness. Moments of crystal clear vision. Each bringing more of the beasts. Visions of fire and death. Visions of the melee more felt than seen. His sword arm burned. His ears rung. For every two of the monsters felled a third would land a blow. Knocked to the ground and regaining his footing, struggling to keep hold of his blade, Gus

fought through sheer will power. A place in his heart opened to let out all of the fear and frustration. Splintered tree and beast all around, his wild swings were all that was left. He struck out a final time and his body gave out and he spun down to the forest floor. Staring up at the sky the rain fell on his face and he saw it once again illuminated bright and shining before all was dark and he lost consciousness.

His eyes opened to a bright gray sky. His thoughts leapt to the steady rain falling on the calmed forest. The many rhythms blending together in an unbroken song. The ache throughout his body made itself known as he began to stir.

A muddy white muzzle nudged his cheek while soft whimpers pleaded with him to rise. She needed him to get up.

"I'm trying girl" was all he could manage to say. The sight of his movement started her wagging and crying all at once. He noticed that it wasn't like before. The moment wasn't one of pure happiness. It was clear her ordeal wasn't over, not yet.

He slipped his arms from the now loosened vines. He found his leg wedged underneath a hulking mass of branches. His actions groggy and slow.

"Funny how normal it seems now. Wasn't a little while ago it tried to kill me. Was it a little while?" He had no idea how long it had been that he had been lying there. He guessed not more than a few hours, but he had no way of knowing for sure. All of his senses were masked by the dull pain and the light of day.

With some digging and pushing with his other leg, Gus managed free and crouched to rest. The dog whimpered and licked his face. When he finally stood, he took in the sundered forest. His home was destroyed. Torn apart by the violence of the storm. A sadness came over him with the knowledge. His first real home was gone. There was nothing to salvage.

The dog whimpered and paced, trying anything to get him to move quicker. To follow her along the narrow dog trail that led towards the glade. He limped along after her, taking short detours to collect his weapons.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

When they crested the small hill leading down into the glade the dog ran off towards her pack. His laborious travel had him staring at the path as he struggled with his breath. Looking down through the trees into the clearing with blurry eyes through the steady rain, he saw three white shapes sitting in a circle. In the center lie a collection of robes. Gus moved as fast as he could down the path.

"Calen!" his small muscles sore throughout "Calen!"

He made his way to the center of the glade. The final boundary in their battle. As he approached, the dogs looked at him and whimpered.

"Calen?" Gus dropped his bow to the ground. He took careful steps forward and kneeled down next to his friend's body. It was clear he was gone.

"So still" he thought to himself. He couldn't help but marvel at the stillness that only death can provide. The dogs looked pleaded with their eyes as he rolled him over. He checked him for wounds, hoping against hope that life still remained here. His body was covered in lashes and scrapes, his hair matted down with rain and mud, dry blood covering him. But he looked at peace. Gus saw that his friend had achieved his own greatest dream, to become one with the forest.

"Calen."

The tears came with little heaves, but he couldn't make a sound. Gus sat back onto his feet and put his head down into his hands. One dog lifted back his head and howled his mourning. One, then the other, joined their brother.

Gus sat still sobbing into his hands, his companions' voices enveloping him. Frozen still for moments, he felt something deep in his chest. He felt it there, a weight, a stone, robbing him of his breath. He managed an audible sob. Then another.

Gus threw back his head back towards the sky, eyes shut tight against the pain.

"OOOOOOOOOOWHOOOOOO!
 OOOOooowhooOOO!
 OOOOOOOOOOWHOOOOOO!"

Their four voices sang their love to the heavens. To the forest.

To Find a Home

Two days had passed as he busied himself. The rain had let up and the sun shown throughout the forest. Where it landed on destruction, there seemed to be hope.

"Well that's lovely" he said it out loud to the pack, believing that they understood. They patrolled, napped, played and chased throughout the woods that had been untouched by the devastation. Peace had returned.

Making his way through a destroyed area, where only husks of dead trees stood, something caught his eye as he passed. A flicker of movement beneath the debris of the forest floor. Crouching down to get a better look a smile crept onto Gus' face once again. A small sprout was working up to the light. A single fresh green leaf. A simple augury of the life to come.

Gus looked out onto the burial mound. The earthen structure would have pleased Calen. In a season it would be claimed by nature. Only the most curious, only the most dedicate would ever see the small peculiarities, signs Gus left in place, so that such a person would understand the gravity of this glade. A fitting resting place for his friend.

He tied his pack up again and straightened his clothes. Patted and groped the places he kept his tools.

"C'mon guys" He looking around a last time, "this is someone else's home to find now."

Gus walked out into the sunlight as a gentle breeze swayed the grasses of the planes. White shapes flitted around him, in and out the green.