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by Scott Sandridge**

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Treecutter

Scott Sandridge

Kale picked up a twig. He crushed it in his wrapped hand, and it fell apart with barely a sound. He flung the remains aside and said, "More brittle than last year; not even worth burning."

Wren gave a grunt and said, "Same luck with the others, I bet."

"Winter'll be rough this year," said Kale. "The last wood-gathering before the snow comes, and we barely have enough to keep warm, let alone cook our meat."

"Or trade for steel," added Wren. He rubbed his finger along the worn edge of his flint spearhead. "Too bad; was looking forward to having a real weapon for next year's hunt. This damn head's almost had its last sharpening."

Kale tapped his skid with his boot, then crossed his arms and leaned against a massive oak, "You'd think these trees would at least have the decency to drop good wood for once."

"Aye," said Wren. He scratched his beard; his downcast brows formed more wrinkles than what were already on his forehead. "Be nice if one of these grand oaks fell like last winter when the ice rain came. We'd have plenty wood for certain then."

Kale rubbed the blade of his steel axe and said, "We could make one fall; wouldn't take many strikes to do it."

"That's blasphemy talk there lad," said Wren. "I told you before about that. I won't warn you again."

"But I don't see why...."

"Hush lad! You don't want the Forest Guardian hear you talking like that. You'd be dead for certain, you would," Wren picked up his skid and began dragging it down the slope. "Or worse...."

Kale shook his head, sighed, and followed.



The Woodtender tribe gathered around the fire, and Kale was last to arrive. As he nudged himself between Wren and Terra, Elder Sun spoke, "Late again. Do you care to explain why, or do you not wish to bother with excuses for once?"

Kale's cheeks turned red when he heard a chuckle from Terra. Her chuckle came to an abrupt end by one look from Elder Moons. Kale bowed his head and kept silent.

Elder Sun tightened his withered fingers around his worn walking stick as he led the tribe in prayer to the Forest Guardian. When the prayer was finished, he said, "This winter our endurance and faith shall be tested like never before. We must...."

"Are you sure?" Kale's interruption created several gasps from the rest of his tribe, followed by looks that could've shattered the polished stones Kale once saw when he traded with the Mountain delvers. His audacity was rewarded with a painful jab in the ribs by Wren, "Mind your manners, lad."

Elder Moons rested her hands on Elder Sun's shoulders. She then looked at Kale and asked, "Do you wish to share your vast wisdom with us, young one? Or a challenge, perhaps?"

The warmth in Kale's cheeks increased, and he felt beads of sweat on his brow, "I would never challenge your wisdom, elders; I just have a question."

"Then speak your question."

Kale released a long, slow exhale then said, "Are you sure it's our endurance that is to be tested? Could it not be our wits? What if...?"

"Lad," said Wren, "Your not...."

"Why would the Forest Guardian be against us taking what we need for survival? Is not survival a part of nature?" Kale's voice grew stronger as the words came to his mind with greater force, "Why would she wish us to freeze to death and starve when there is plenty and to spare in the forest? Just two good whole trees would be more than enough...."

"Enough!" Elder Sun shouted, "I will hear no more! What you speak of is blasphemy. The trees are sacred, the first of her children. To harm them in any way is to suffer her wrath."

Kale felt as if something inside him hardened. Amidst the gasps and angry shouts, only one thing snared his attention: Terra's lovely face. He pictured that face withered from hunger, pictured the bright light in her eyes dimmed. And that was all he needed to know, "Fine! I'll go seek the Forest Guardian, myself, and ask her what her wishes are."

The tribe went silent. Wren's husky voice broke the silence, "Lad, are you crazy? Disturb her, and she'll kill you for certain."

"Then she'll just have to kill me," said Kale. As he walked away from his tribe, he added, "Better to die doing something than to die doing nothing."



Kale held his chopping axe and wondered if he should bring it with him or leave it behind. What would the Forest Guardian think if he brought the axe along? Isn't that why he was seeking her in the first place? He might run into predators and need something better than a flint spear to fight them off. He just won't use it on trees... yet.

He heard Terra's light footsteps before she had entered his hut. The sight of her always took his breath away. Her skin was different from other tribeswomen: more like copper than bronze. Her amber eyes were slanted, and her ears swept up and tapered to fine points. Her hair was like gold-red fire, a perfect contrast to the raven hair common among the tribe.

"You're going?" She asked. Kale sensed an odor of spring lilies that sent a shiver down his spine.

Kale shut his eyes to block out the sight of her. It was the only way he could return to packing his provisions. "Someone has to."

"But why does it have to be you?"

"Because no one else will. Besides, it was my idea."

Her silence left him uncomfortable. He turned around and tried to assure her with a smile, "I'll be back."

She turned her back to him, and her head lowered. Her voice was barely a whisper, yet to Kale it had an odd clarity, "Your death is in those woods. I can feel it."

He moved forward to hold her, "I will be back."

"No," she said as she nudged him away, "you won't."

Terra fled from the hut.



Kale felt like he was being watched the moment he entered the forest. By the third night his suspicions were realized when he saw eyes in the

shadows beyond the firelight. Two pairs were constantly on the move, but one remained still, unblinking. The sounds of wolf howls were too close for comfort, so he did not sleep. The sunrise revealed a quiet forest. Nothing moved.

And he could see no signs of last night's stalkers.

He continued toward the center of the forest, but with more caution than before. Just another night or two and he would be at the Sacred Glade, and this would be over... one way or the other.

Deeper in, the undergrowth became more dense and the footing less even. There was little light to see by, even by midday. The trees towered to unbelievable heights with branches thick enough to build huts on. The bark was different, too, with colors ranging from pale gray to almost black. So Kale was not too surprised when he stepped under a bent root and found himself face-to-face with the biggest bear he had ever seen. The bear sniffed at the air, its muzzle the size of Kale's upper torso. Don't move, he told himself, just don't move....

After what felt like forever, the bear finally wobbled away. Kale let out the breath he had held the whole time. He waited for his heart to stop pounding before he continued forward.

That night the forest was quiet and Kale slept. Before sunrise he woke up to find himself surrounded by wolves the size of ponies, and with them was the bear. The bear shrank and shifted its form until a woman of feral beauty stood before him. The sight of her made his mouth dry up. All feeling departed his legs as he fell to the ground before her feet, and he felt as if his heart would pound itself out of his chest. He shut his eyes to block the sight of her, but her image, fresh in his mind, was no less potent.

He could feel her eyes upon him, and it was as if the fire inside those eyes had leaped out to sear his soul. Her words came to his ears and penetrated his thoughts, "Why have you come here. This is a sacred place, and for your kind to enter means death."

"I..." Words failed him, and it was a struggle just to form a simple thought. Somewhere in the confusion he could make out a steel scimitar gripped by slender russet fingers. Then he felt cold steel touch his neck. "Speak!"

"My village is dying," The words came out of Kale on their own accord without his need to think, "We need wood. I came to ask your permission to cut down two trees."

The scimitar was raised to strike. Kale shut his eyes and said, "My people will die if we don't. Kill me, if you must, but spare my people. Please, let them have wood."

Kale waited for the strike, but the scimitar was sheathed instead.

"Rise, Trecutter," The fire in her eyes cooled, and her voice became as soothing as a waterfall. "I shall speak to the trees for you, but it will be up to them to decide."

Kale stayed silent. As he waited, Terra's words came flooding back into his mind, "Your death is in those woods." Was it true? Would the coming sunrise be the last thing he would see? Would he even get to see the sunrise? What of Terra? Who would be there for Terra?

He released a slow exhale. If saving his people meant his death, then so be it. He could accept death so long as it wasn't in vain.

"The trees have decided," said the goddess. It was then that Kale realized that neither of them had budged from where they had been, yet the terrain was no longer recognizable. The trees were closer, more crowded. In

some areas the earth looked freshly turned as if roots had been pulled out of the ground. "The old trees are willing to give their lives to make room for their children. This is the pact they will offer. Cut only the old trees that sleep. For each tree cut down, you must plant two new trees in its place. Break this pact, and you will suffer disasters that you have never before faced.

"Tell your village."

"Thank you," said Kale. He started to leave, but she placed a hand on his shoulder. Her touch aroused him, and his cheeks turned red; but if she had noticed, she didn't show it.

"But you, Treecutter, must return here after you deliver the message. You entered this sacred place uninvited. For that, you must die. Do you understand?"

Kale gave a slow nod. He never saw the scimitar leave its sheath.



Kale found Terra sleeping under an old oak at the edge of the village. The blue moon, Minkaraust, was setting behind the trees. Shilak rose full in the sky, and its silver light silhouetted Terra's form. He dared not wake her. He sat beside her and watched her sleep. He could see where tears had dried on her face. He carefully pulled twigs and leaves out of her hair. She seemed thinner. It made him wonder about how much time had passed since his meeting with the Forest Guardian.

When he could no longer resist, he caressed her cheek. His touch woke her. She yawned, blinked twice. As soon as recognition set into her eyes, she gave a joyous shout and wrapped her arms around him. The feel of her body against his brought a strong yearning to Kale's soul. Her voice sounded

like the most beautiful thing on earth, "Kale! You're back! Thank the goddess you're alive. I missed you so much."

"I wasn't gone that long," he said.

"Two weeks, Kale," she said. "We thought you were dead. Wren even went out to look for you. He just came back last night. Where've you been?"

"I saw her," he said. He wanted to say more.

"Who?" Terra asked. "You mean...?"

Kale nodded. "I need you to deliver a message to Elder Sun for me."

"Sure, but," Terra said, "why not tell him, yourself?"

Kale said nothing for a moment. Then he gave her the message. When he finished he said, "I have to go back now. She's waiting for me. I can feel her calling me back."

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Their embrace said everything their words couldn't. "Go now, Terra. Don't look back."

Terra obeyed but walked as if a great weight tugged at her. The spirit of Kale Trecutter watched her for one last moment then walked back into the woods.



Scott M. Sandridge is a part-time writer and full-time janitor. He learned how to write through hard work, trial-and-error, and the occasional writers' workshops.

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Melinda is a self-taught artist and writer; drawing came first, writing second. Her favorite genres are fantasy and sci-fi because of the depth of imagination.