

The Mountain

My wish is to stay always like this, living quietly in a corner of nature.

- *Claude Monet*

The woods ranged high into the mountains, a fern green cover which draped valleys, and covered tracks into the infinite growth. During the early hours of the morning when the sun was still shy, the woods were wreathed in mists which lingered, eventually forming fine crystals which sparkled on the emerald foliage.

It was a mystical world of beauty and cruelty in equal measure. Animals knew the joy of their young, only to have them perish at nature's whim. Yet, there was also order. A divine structure, which saw a balance of good and evil. Life and death lived here as neighbours in an eternal dance which had lasted since time began.

There was no question of morality, life simply was. Man had not yet disturbed the delicate truce between the eternal powers of life and death. The soil had never known the violation of ploughs or the demarcation of fences. Here, peace reigned in the absence of man and his need to own. The woods, deep and ancient had remained free from humans, except for one.

The man. He had dwelt in the solace of the forest for years, having one day walked into the bough covered shelter, lost to the world. His presence respected the balance, he became a part of the order. He took what he needed, and no more. Greed, desire, and pride had been left behind in the world of men. In the verdant land he dwelt in a measure of peace which he had only come to know here, safe under the spreading boughs.

Days were spent in silence. There was no need to converse, the forest was alive with sentences and expressions which he spent hours listening to: He sat mesmerised by the owl calling at dusk, a ghostly song to welcome the hunt; and he bowed to the deep throated growl of the mountain cat that warned him off when she had whelps.

This was a world far removed from the years of his youth. Far from the bloodied sand, shouts, cries of pain and explosions which still haunted his nights. That world was dead to him now. All that mattered was the daily flow of the woods. He carefully patrolled the border between his world and the world beyond. The wraith-humans dwelt beyond in the loud world, the fast world, and they were a constant threat that he kept at bay.

They would come to the boundary with their machines to enforce their will upon the land. At night, hidden in the dark, the man would persuade the wraith-men and their monsters to leave. Rumours of a deadly creature that ranged the forest spread and soon wraith-workers were leaving. The fear of the unknown driving them away from lucrative contracts in the interest of preserving their own lives.

The man was a shadow. They never saw him, nor did they understand what he wanted. They only knew that the lands of the mountain was not open to their conquest.

It was the first of spring when the man was stirred from his slumber by an echo that disturbed the forest. Something had disrupted the order. A presence had entered the forest without permission. Ripples of the presence were tangible on the air. Birds ruffled their feathers in protest, before seeking safety under their wings. The wind had increased its' howl and snow whirled in the drifts where winter still lingered.

Quietly, a shadow in the dark, the man moved from tree to bush, ever closer to the disturbance. Drawing nearer he stopped and sniffed the air. He tasted the metallic tang of iron, and fear. It throbbed in panic upon the ether. Moving only upon the breath of the wind, he crawled through the scree until the intruder was revealed to him. Sitting on the ground below an elder pine, was a small child. She was wearing a torn blue dress which was stained with blood, and she was wailing in fear.

The man drew back. He had no wish to become involved in the world of men again. The child was an intruder upon his solitude, an unwelcome reminder that there was life beyond the boundary. Edging backward, he prepared to abandon the scene and leave responsibility behind. The sound of the mountain cat's growl froze his retreat. Dimly lit by the spring moon, the feline mother was crouched on a tree branch, her fangs barred at the unknown threat which the child had brought into the forest world.

There was no conscious thought. His limbs moved of their own volition. Yet, suddenly, he was next to the child, his arms warding off the predator which was ready to launch in defence of her territory. Tail twitching uncertainly, the big cat withdrew into the foliage.

The child had stopped crying, she looked up at him with large blue eyes which shone from a tear-stained face. There was a bloody gash along her blonde, curly hairline. She was small, probably no more than a toddler. Her feet were bare and he could see that her toes were blue from the cold. Anxious, she reached her small puffy hands up to him, seeking comfort. For a moment more he hesitated, then he scooped up the small form, held her close to his chest, and vanished into the forest with his burden.

He gently applied an herbal poultice to the cut on her face, while she stared at him with luminous eyes. Trusting, and innocent, this was no wraith. Taking some dried fruits from a pocket at his hip he touched a finger to his mouth before passing it to her. She held it for a second, then eagerly started sucking at the sticky flesh. A rare smile slashed across the man's broad features. The child made a face as she ate one of the sour fruits, he mimicked the face at which she laughed.

Satisfied that he had done all that he could for his young charge, he walked to the entrance of the hidden cave which was his home. The child's eyes never left the figure of her protector. With him there, she would be safe. Eventually, fatigue overcame her and she curled up under the protecting warmth of his coat.

For the next several days, the man cared for the infant. She did not speak, for which he was grateful. Silence was important to him, words were from the outside world, and he was no longer a part of it. The child became a part of his world. She started copying his tasks; collecting tiny bundles of wood for their small fire, searching for tree nuts with him, fetching water from the stream, and digging for the yellow roots that he made a stew from at night. She seemed to relish it when he nodded approvingly at her, but at times she would stop and stare into the distance as if searching for something, or someone.

The man knew that there must be someone who the child belonged to, but the joy of her company was too precious to fret about what he could not control. Company. Something which he did not know he had missed, and now, he felt the warmth of not being lonely despite years of being alone. But, joy was a frivolous emotion that never lingered. One night at their small blaze, the man noticed that the child's cut had opened again and fluid was draining from the wound. He frowned, it should have healed with the herb poultice by now. Many of his injuries had been treated with the plants in the past. As they settled down to sleep, the man became aware that the child was trembling in her dreams, her face had become pale, and sweat beaded her brow. The man knew then that the child was ill, and he would not be able to help her. Turning on his back he stared up at the walls of the cave which he had over years covered with drawings and diagrams during hours of loneliness, seeking a solution. He knew that the wraiths could help the child. They had medicine and machines which could heal her body. But, this meant that he had to take her to the place where the wraiths gathered ... the town.

The town. A sprawl of asphalt, brick, and demarcations. It was staked into the land, a claim of unlawful ownership. Here the wraiths existed, they worked and laboured, but they knew nothing of life. They were not alive, they only lived from one plotted moment to the next. Suburbia was a place for schemes and plots, where they existed close, but not together.

The man studied the gangrenous sore of development which bled on the land in the valley. He tasted the rancid smells of progress; diesel fumes, oil and burnt smoke. Streets criss-crossed the growth like veins which pulsed with fast moving vehicles. Cautiously, he considered his path through the maze. Near the centre of the nest was a tall building with a crimson sign above it. He knew this symbol – the crossed lines meant healing to the wraiths. This was his destination, but getting there meant traversing the treacherous domain of his enemy.

Holding the child tightly he pulled his large coat around them both, shielding her from harm. She was too warm, her skin burning his touch, her breathing shallow and fast. There was not much time for her, he could not falter now.

Stopping at the edge of the first road he hesitated. The sound of his booted foot touching the tar echoed like doom. Swallowing determinedly he set his weight, coursed forward. He walked swiftly, navigating according to the path he had planned from his vantage above the valley. When cars came, he hid from sight behind the steel containers which were all over the side-walks. He easily heard the roaring sounds of the vehicles, and could smell the approaching wraiths with their sickly sweet perfumes. But hiding took time, and it was early evening by the time they reached the tall building. The Red Cross glowed angrily against the dusk sky above them. He shuddered as a vehement wailing sound came hurtling towards them suddenly. Throwing them into a vacant side door he clung to the child, and shut his eyes tightly. The monstrosity drove past them to stop at the entrance to the building. Bright amber and crimson lights flashed as the vehicle was opened and a bed on wheels pulled from inside with wraiths scrambling over the occupant. Voices were excited and orders shouted.

Bright lights exploded painfully in his mind. He was transported to the past and the pain which had taken him then. Loud bangs, explosions and the acrid scent of soot echoed in his memory. He flattened himself, curled into a foetal position in the doorway, while fear pulsed through him and he softly whimpered.

Finally, the flashing lights and the angry noise dissipated into the night. Gasping for breath, the man struggled to his feet, cradling the infant. He wiped sweat and tears on the sleeves of the heavy coat. The fabric stained now, barely showing the two golden chevrons which were pinned on each shoulder, pinned to his past and his pain.

The man waited for a quiet moment before sneaking into the brightly lit rooms beyond the cross. The floors were slippery and the constant flow of movement could not be avoided. He had pulled a ragged scarf over his face to hide from the enemy. Fortunately, the wraiths seemed uninterested in the presence of the man and child. In the chaos he saw a wraith female standing to one side of the rest. She was making marks on a paper, and there was light framing her form in a glowing halo from the artificial globes along the wall. The man was struck by her face and its' shining features. There was kindness there, he had not expected this from a wraith.

Holding the child in one arm, he pulled a bright blade which he gently pressed in the back of the wraith. She gasped, preparing to scream, but the man silenced her with a serpentine 'Shhh.' Turning to look at him, she saw the unconscious child. He tried to remember the words to ask for her to heal the child, but memory was a grey void which he didn't visit voluntarily. Finally, hesitantly, he framed one word: "H...Help." Nodding, the wraith lead him and the child to a different room where she began to connect the child to machines that beeped and analysed what was wrong with her. In the confusing whirl of noises he did not see her push the small button on the wall with a bell above it.

Seconds later, the doors behind him burst inwards and two burly wraiths rushed in. They had some kind of weapon in their hands and instinct took over. The man reacted with lightning speed, twisting the one wraith's arm around to throw him off balance and into the other assailant. They landed with groans on the floor and he jumped onto them, ready to finish the fight with raised death in his hands. A scream from behind stopped him, slowly he lowered his hands and looked at the female wraith. She stood with the child in her arms, protectively shielding the child who was now awake.

"NO! Don't!" the wraith shouted, "Just leave. Go!" she instructed. He made as if to reach for the child, but she turned the child away from him, recoiling back. "No," she said firmly.

He knew then that the child was home, he was not. Hesitating for a moment longer, he looked at the child with the large blue eyes who had lighted his life, if however briefly. He set his jaw and turned to the door. Looking over his shoulder one last time, the child had raised her small hand and waved farewell at her protector. Slowly, he raised his hand in response before vanishing through the door. Running now he disappeared into the night beyond the Red Cross.

The wraiths were angered by the man who had intruded into their domain. He had taken one of their own. That he had brought her back meant nothing to them. They began hunting him with merciless determination. He had to deviate from the path that had previously guided him safely, and now, he was lost. Air burnt in his lungs from running and his muscles ached from strain at jumping over fences and walls to escape pursuit. Sirens wailed behind him, and the wraiths began shooting at him with their weapons. Most of the steel bit into walls, but one had found its' mark in his shoulder, and weakened he struggled on.

Near dawn he managed to make it to the edge of the forest, exhausted and confused. He struggled through the tangled foliage, then using the last of his strength pulled himself up into a tree. Running along the branch he leapt to the next tree and the next. The sound of pursuit paused momentarily at the point where he had climbed the tree, then he heard the growling bark of the dogs and knew that he was far from safe.

The pursuit continued without pause, and weakened by blood loss, the man struggled on. The dogs were close now, he could hear their panting, and smell their hot breath close behind. Ahead he heard the rushing roar of the mountain stream. It was his only hope now. So close, but still so far. As he parted the last bushes on the gorge bank one of the dogs rushed him. It sank its' teeth into his leg, locking jaws and dragging him to the ground. He struggled on, kicking at the animal which was driven on by the distant whistles of its masters. With one final kick he managed to dislodge the beast and he lay gasping on the precipice as his pursuers cleared the brush. They stood in a half-circle with cold weapons gripped in their pale hands. One stood a little ahead of the others. He raised one hand as if to warn the others back and slowly he stepped forward a little. The other wraiths barked angrily, but the

leader cut them off, and continued edging closer speaking in a soft voice. Desperate to escape the man turned and tried to roll off the edge, but the wraith leapt and pulled him back. He wrapped steel arms around the man, holding him down. Iron bindings were clasped around his wrists and a blanket was hurriedly pulled over his head. Blows landed and he blacked out.

“At least the little girl is safe. Her family must be overjoyed?” the young state trooper said to the police chief. They were driving the police cruiser back to the town with the man locked in the back; still unconscious, he was wrapped in bloodied blankets and bleeding still. “What do you think he did to her, Chief?” he asked looking over his shoulder distrustfully.

“Dunno. She seemed okay when I left the hospital earlier,” the police chief said quietly.

“You should have let us finish the beast,” the policeman continued, “He’s the bastard that’s been assaulting all those construction workers, and damaging equipment at the forest stations. We’ve been trying to catch the son-of-a-bitch for years now.”

“Nope. He’s captured now. This will be the end of it,” the chief replied firmly.

“He broke Bobby Jones’s arm at the hospital, you know. Snapped it like a twig.” The officer chewed his lip angrily. “He should pay. Rabid animals are put down, chief.”

“No, you stay away from him, Jimmy. Do you hear?” the chief ordered now. Jimmy nodded, but his eyes were vengeful still.

They arrived at the hospital and a gurney was brought out, two orderlies lifted the man onto it, and he was securely cuffed to the sides. They eyed the man cautiously, working with the police standing guard.

“Did you see its’ face?” one said to the other, as the police wheeled the prisoner into the hospital.

“Yup. He’s a beast alright. Haven’t seen scars like that before,” His companion said shaking his head in disbelief.

The young doctor that had tended to the child was waiting in a surgery room. She looked disapprovingly at the cuffs and turned to the chief.

“Is this really necessary, chief?” she asked, pulling on surgical gloves.

“Yes. It is, doctor Good-Speed,” he said. “And, I’m staying right here. Not having him hurt anyone else on my watch.”

“This is a surgery, chief. I’m about to anaesthetise him. You aren’t scrubbed and this is a sterile room,” The doctor protested, but the chief simply picked up a face-mask and raised his eye-brows in question.

“Oh, fine, like that helps.” Defeated, doctor Good-Speed turned to the man. She avoided looking at the horrific scars which disfigured his face. To her, he was just a man. A patient in need. She cut the torn and ragged clothing from his upper body. More scars and twisted flesh were revealed.

“Hitting him in the head also didn’t really help,” she muttered, behind her the chief simply sighed. “Just saying.”

“You know that he saved the little girl’s life? She’s diabetic, she was in insulin shock, if he hadn’t brought her in, she’d have been in a coma now,” she said, concentrating on her patient.

Suddenly, the man came to and began thrashing around on the gurney. With a small scream, she jumped back. He growled and moaned through mangled lips, trying to break free. Blood began flowing freely from his wounds.

“Hold him down, chief,” she ordered firmly, taking the anaesthesia syringe. Together they struggled with the thrashing man, but finally, she managed to find a line and injected him. The struggles grew weaker and he faded into unconsciousness.

“It’s okay, just rest,” she said soothingly. “Just rest. You’re safe.” She ran a hand over his shattered brow, her eyes soft with sympathy. “Poor man,” she whispered. “I wonder how he became so mangled.”

“Dunno,” the chief said in his usual nonchalant manner. “But, here, perhaps a clue.” He had picked up the pieces of the man’s clothes and was examining the chevron striped sleeve. “Looks like army,” he noted. Taking a paper from the table he lifted the man’s hand and pressed a bloodied print on the white surface.

“He’s not going to wake up now, chief,” she said and waved him off. “Go. Go, do your police-thing. Find out who he is, if he has family. Please.” The last was a plea.

Nodding in agreement to her implied hope, he looked one last time at the man with the beastly face and left then, armed with the ragged remains of the jacket and bloodied fingerprints, to find out if there was hope.

The police chief studied the man behind the bars. He had regained consciousness inside the jail cell and was pulling mutely at the cuffs which bound him to the bed. The bestial face was a fright to behold: scars criss-crossed the swollen flesh of his cheeks, and his upper lip was permanently retracted into a growling wound. It was hard to imagine that at some time, this had been a man, a normal human who had been broken and had ‘healed’ to this.

Turning his gaze the report which had been faxed to him from the Army base, he read about a life shattered. The photo didn’t resemble the creature at all, yet the finger prints were his. This was Sergeant Anthony Coal: War veteran and decorated soldier. He had returned from a war on some forgotten continent, blown all to hell by a landmine, and the best efforts of his surgeons could only save his life, but not his

sanity. His family and friends had abandoned him, and for a while he had found solace in the bottle, traveling and living off disability benefits, before vanishing from society forever, until now. He had served his country, and been abandoned by it.

Turning from the bars, the chief folded the sheaf of paper and walked to his office. He felt a heaviness of heart. The man was like a loyal dog that had served for years, then in confusion had bitten its' owner. Now, for that crime, he would be put down, or locked away behind bars forever.

He sat down behind the stacked desk drawn into silent reverie, considering the fate of the man down the hall. A soft knock at the door drew him back.

"Sorry to bother you, chief," doctor Good-Speed said from the door. "I have someone I would like you to meet." She stepped inside the office, making way for a young woman holding the small child with golden curls.

"Hello, my name is Emma," The woman introduced herself, her voice made awkward by the neck support that she wore. "And this, is my Bella." She kissed the child fondly. "A week ago I had an accident on the D56. My child climbed from the wreck and wandered into the forest. She would have died there. I would like to meet the man who saved my child."

He could think of a million reasons why the woman should not traumatise herself or the child further, but the one reason why it was right dominated his thoughts. It was right.

"Ma'am, it would be my honour to escort you," he said gruffly, rising from his chair and leading the way.

At the sight of the little girl, the man stirred in the cell. He pulled against his chains, reaching for the child. She smiled and reached out towards him. Her mother set her down and she happily waddled to the bars, reaching through to touch his large gnarled hand. The messed up face did not bother her in the least, and for a moment his face shone with light.

"My daughter is a severe autistic, chief," the mother explained softly. "She has never before tried to make any physical contact with anyone other than myself. If people touch her she starts screaming. Doctors have always said that she is completely shut in her own world, and will never be able to do even the most mundane tasks. Yet, this morning, she brought me a cup of water at the breakfast table." Wiping tears she sniffed loudly and continued, "My child has never even fed herself, and she brought me water."

The woman knelt at the bars and reached her hand through to touch the hand holding her child. "Thank you," she said simply. The man stared at her, and then at the child. He grunted, nodded ever so slightly, then let go of the small fingers and turned over on the bed, shutting the world out again.

"Chief," doctor Good-Speed implored softly. "They will either lock him away for the rest of his life, or he'll get the needle. Some of those construction workers last year died from their injuries, you know it was him."

“I know!” the chief said setting his jaw.

“Please, you can’t ...” The mother held her child and looked up at him with the same luminous eyes, pleading.

“There’s nothing I can do Ma’am. I’m an officer of the law.” He turned away from them, not trusting his voice any further.

“They’ll put him down like a dog, chief,” the doctor whispered, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Damn woman, what do you want of me?” he growled.

She stood silent for a moment then whispered softly, “Humanity.”

He looked at the pleading faces before him and behind them the broad back which isolated the man. Isolated, as he had been in the forests. There he had been free in his isolation.

“Damn,” the chief muttered. “Okay, but I can’t do this alone.”

The forests slid by beyond the windows, their shapes dark and intimidating beyond the glass. It was a strange world to them, a world they did not enter, but home to the man. The pick-up truck roared, struggling up the narrow path, shaking like a nervous animal. The occupants were silent, set on their course.

Behind the wheel, the chief was in deep thought, planning how he would explain the escape. In the back-seat the man lay in a drugged stupor, his head resting on the doctor’s lap. Emma and Bella shared the passenger seat, their gazes far off. Bella was happily pointing at trees and clapping her small hands.

After what seemed hours, they reached the end of the road. Ahead the trees had become so dense that even light seemed to waver. It was a closed off world. Isolated. Free.

“That’s it then. This is the most remote of the forest tracks. No-one ever goes deeper than this,” the chief said, stopping the truck.

For a moment they looked at each other, then without any further comment, they climbed from the truck, carefully carrying the man between them. Gently, they set him on the ground, kneeling around him for a moment, before backing away.

“He could die from his wounds anyway,” the chief stated dumbly.

“But, he’ll die free,” doctor Good-Speed said sighing.

She removed a syringe from her pocket and gently administered the drug, within seconds the man awoke. He started into consciousness, hands raised defensively. Confused he looked around at the trees, then focused on the child. He noted the way in which she held to her mother, and the way in which the leader-wraith-man rested a hand on the weapon holstered at his side.

“You’d best be off then,” the chief warned simply, tossing a parcel with supplies next to him.

For a moment the man hesitated, then he scooped up the small packet, pulled the dark coat which they had dressed him in closer around his frame and limbered into the forest. Turning back for one last look at the small crowd, he sniffed the forest air, and then vanished from memory.

The small group lingered longer, hoping almost, to catch a last glimpse of the forest man, but eventually they returned to the vehicle and headed back to the town, their lives, and reality.