

CHAPTER 2

This part of the forest had a very different feel. It was just as ancient and grand, but so much darker that it was difficult to see the path. The darkness consumed all the colors, and left only gray and black and brown. It was very still, and a dense silence had been poured into the spaces between trunks and branches and leaves. The temperature was also a few degrees cooler, and the mist had thickened. A heavy odor of primeval mildew and decay filled the air.

There wasn't much sunlight penetrating through the growth here, but the darkness was more than just a lack of light. It was darkness I could feel, intense and adhesive. It was without definite form, yet it elicited an increasing feeling of grief. It became more intense the further I walked, and became so oppressive that I considered turning back.

Shortly I came to a small group of stones not far off the path. I knelt down to take a look, for it appeared to be more than a random pile of rocks. They were arranged in a simple manner, apparently not without purpose. The stack was about three feet square at the base, and rose to a height of about two feet. The stones were smooth and round and plain, being of no obvious value on their own. Together they must have comprised a monument

of great devotion, for around the base had been placed many freshly gathered flowers. They provided the only color to be seen in this somber place.

It was a powerful marker, and rising to my feet I realized that I had been weeping. Silent tears were crawling down my face, and I wondered at what may have caused them. I brushed them away and started back on the path. As I walked the heaviness gradually decreased, as if this small devotional was the very heart and center of the sorrow. I was relieved to feel the depression lifting.

Now I knew for certain that this garden was inhabited, or at least frequented, by someone. My curiosity increased with each step.

I soon came to a sharp rise in the trail, shaded by a great green canopy from the trees. Their ancient exposed roots crossed the path as if to aid me in walking the incline. I could see a faint glow beneath the arch of the trees ahead, and I quickened my pace to reach this new clearing.

I was hoping to find the heretofore elusive inhabitant of this little paradise, and as I broke through the last of the trees, I caught sight of him. I believe he actually saw me first, though he wasn't looking at me by the time my view of him was clear.

He was bending over a large steaming kettle, hung over a low fire, stirring its contents and sampling it for the proper taste. He nodded in approval, then straightened up and looked suddenly and squarely at me. His look wasn't aggressive, but it wasn't exactly friendly either. He was simply looking at me, without betraying any emotion or inclination. His gaze was steady, and didn't break for so little as a second. He was silent, too, and it was apparently up to me to speak first.

"Um, hello, sir," I stumbled. "Sorry to have disturbed you. I seem to be a bit off track, and didn't mean to intrude."

His stare continued. He cocked his head slightly to the right.

"Perhaps I should just head back out. Sorry again." I turned to go, reluctantly. After traveling for so long, and alone, I was quite keen on having a good conversation to go with this interesting diversion.

Just then he cleared his throat, and spoke in a deliberate yet warm voice. “No, you don’t have to go. I can see you’re rather tired. You could probably use a short rest.”

I nodded that indeed I could.

“Well, since you’re here, you might as well come on over and sit for a while.” He motioned to one of the two large round stones near the fire, and I moved slowly in that direction.

“Thank you. Really, don’t let me inconvenience you.”

“It’s quite all right. Been on the road long?” He resumed his stirring.

“As long as I can recall.”

“Headed someplace in particular, or just out for a stroll?” He looked at my trappings, and smiled slightly to punctuate his sarcasm.

“Oh, I’m going somewhere, I think. I’m not quite sure anymore. Hoped I’d be there by now. I’ve been told it’s quite a place.” Then I remembered my earlier notion that this might be it. I added, “By the way, this wouldn’t happen to be . . .”

He broke me off abruptly, as if the very question disturbed him. “No, I assure you, this is not what you were looking for. But it may serve you just as well.” A bit more gently he added, “Would you like a drink of water?”

He extended an earthen cup, filled with water from a pitcher near his feet. I took the cup from his dirt-stained hand and enjoyed a good, long drink.

“So, do you get many visitors?”

“Oh, a few. It’s a pretty narrow trail over to here, and there’s only a few that take it. But I guess some people still like to see a reed shaken by the wind.¹ They all mention they are on the way to some place, but they aren’t sure what it looks like, how long it will take them to get there, or even if they’ll make it. They’ve all been given directions and sent off by others who swear they know the way even though they’ve never been there themselves. It’s interesting to watch from where I sit. It really would be amusing if it weren’t so sad.”

His stirring mimicked his words, illustrating the cycle.

“So you’ve had others come through, then, like me?”

“Yes, and they’re all as tired and worn as you are.” He took another sample from the pot of soup. “Don’t worry; all are welcome, so please relax. And put down that pack! What on earth do you have in there?”

I looked at my pack. It scraped the ground as I held it in my hand.

“I was told I needed all this stuff,” I said, almost apologetically.

“Well, you might want to rethink that advice. It looks a bit rough. For now, why don’t you just put it down over there and rest. And please, have a seat!” He waved both hands emphatically, as if he could make me sit by doing so. I put my pack beside the nearest rock, and sat down.

He continued to stir the soup, and it sent up a truly seductive aroma. He put the large wooden spoon to his mouth and slurped noisily, looking at me through the tops of his eyes. He could tell I was hungry, and he enjoyed teasing me.

“Hungry?” he asked as he reached for my empty cup.

“Yes, sir. Quite.” I handed him the cup.

“Well, this won’t be ready for a while yet. Do you have time to wait, or do you need to hurry on?” He poured some more water.

“I can wait,” I said, retrieving my cup, and taking a quick drink. “But are you sure I’m not imposing?”

“Not at all. To tell the truth, I was expecting you. I usually know when someone has entered the garden, and I figured you’d make it here sooner or later. You’re welcome to stay.”

“Um, thank you, sir.” I was still feeling a bit awkward.

I stretched my feet out in front of me, and ran the heels of my hands along my thighs. The rest by the stream had been refreshing, but now fatigue was beginning to settle in my legs. My host watched me as though he had seen this ritual a few times before.

“Hey, here’s an idea,” he said with an awkward cheerfulness, “You’ve built up a good coat of grime on your trip. There’s a pond over there fed by a hot spring. It would do wonders for you to clean up and soak a bit, if you want to. And when you get done, this soup should be ready.”

I protested at first, as if it were somehow polite to refuse his hospitality. But he persisted, and I soon found myself diving naked into a pool of pure and transparent water.

The soothing warmth of the water flowed around me as I swam, pulling the very weariness out of my muscles. I could feel it flowing around my arms, my legs, my chest, through my fingers as I pushed across the surface. I immersed myself again, and let it wash through my hair, around my ears, over my closed eyes. I shook my head under the water to let it flow over my entire scalp and to work the tension out of my neck. Then I just hung there, and let its rejuvenating arms bear my full weight.

I looked around the pond while I floated. Soft green grass padded its banks, and clusters of reeds and lilies erupted at intervals along the shore. Through the bunch that screened me from my host I could see his encampment. It was rather spartan, yet appeared to have everything one would need. He had chosen a rather small clearing to inhabit, and had erected a compact shelter of wood and stone near the edge of the forest. In the center of the glade he had his fire, and over it was hanging that wonderfully aromatic pot of soup. Not far from this was a small clay oven, with a little tuft of smoke issuing out of the top. Just outside of the clearing was a small patch of vegetables, which I supposed had supplied the ingredients for my upcoming meal. Beyond this I could see the tops of some grain, a vineyard, and an orchard.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature, however, was an enormous tree, just behind his house. It was an arrogant tree, and had an aspect of defiance about it. Its base looked as though it were a giant fist that had thrust itself into the earth and was clawing at the ground. It rather seemed as though the earth was suspended from the tree, rather than the tree springing from the earth. It was thick with glossy leaves, and full of large white flowers. Among the flowers were occasional fruit, rosy orange in color, just the perfect size to fit in my hand.

I turned my attention to the man. He sat by the fire, and occasionally would walk to his house, or to the oven, then back to stir the soup. He was a most exquisite man, beautiful in every

respect. He was of above average height, and of very solid build. Through his curious home-spun clothes I could tell he possessed a very seasoned strength, and his rolled-up sleeves revealed powerful and well-tanned forearms. The veins showed boldly on his hands, telling of their labor at this man's apparent hobby and occupation—gardening. From the dirt I had noticed under his fingernails, and the stains on his trousers, he must have been working at this shortly before I arrived.

He had a full head of hair, a gleaming black and silver mass, thick with body and reaching midway down his neck. It framed a face that told of many travels, and not a few troubles. There was, however, such a tranquil affect to his face: He was a man who had found peace, and it seemed to reach to every inch of his being. When I sat with him moments ago, I felt the peace, even through the awkwardness of the situation. He had a very calming presence. It was like I was meeting an old friend.

Then there were his eyes! I had never seen eyes so deep, so full of wisdom. In only a moment, he was able to see through to my very soul, yet I had no sense of violation, just as I felt no exposure here in this pool. I felt only comfort, like those steel eyes were not looking at me with contempt or judgment, but instead with pride, pleasure, and a sense of celebration.

But I caught something in them that I couldn't quite name. Some kind of pain, more severe than most suffer, of incredible intensity. It was way back in there, but still discernible.

As I watched him moving through his camp, I noticed a certain grace in his motions. In every movement, or even in just sitting still, he had a quiet dignity, definitely masculine, but full of beauty.

I believed this man belonged here. I believed he belonged anywhere.

He made one more trip to his house, and brought out some bowls and utensils. He looked over my way, saw me watching, and waved his hand to let me know the soup was ready. I returned his wave, and glided slowly to the bank. I smoothed my hair back as I stepped out of the pond and then shook off the excess water. I slipped on the loose pants and tunic he sent with me. They were

of a coarsely woven fabric, and the air flowed through freely onto my still moist skin. I picked up my shoes and clothes and walked around the pond back to the rock where I'd left my pack. I set my stuff down. He was watching me with a faint smile.

"Feeling better?" he asked from across the fire.

"Am I ever! That was wonderful, thanks." I took another look around. "This is truly a beautiful place."

"Oh, I suppose it will do. It's getting there, anyway." His modesty, though obviously feigned, was charming.

"Have you been here long?"

"Hmm, yes, I guess by most standards it's been a long time. To me it doesn't seem that way." He scooped some soup into a bowl, and reached over to hand it to me. "Care for some bread?"

"Yes, please," I answered, as I took the steaming bowl from him. "This really is kind of you, especially since I just dropped in."

"I believe I told you that you were expected. Or at least anticipated. It's no trouble for me at all. I hope you like the soup. I entertain so rarely, and don't often cook with others in mind."

The aroma steaming up from the dish told me I wouldn't be disappointed. I sat down, took a noisy taste, and nodded immediately with my approval.

"This is really quite good! I should think you've cooked a few pots of soup in your life. If you don't mind my asking, how'd you come by this place anyway? It's a bit off the map."

"Yes, thankfully it is. It was once part of my father's estate. I was actually born and raised here. My wife and I made it into a good home for a while." He looked off into the trees, as if he could see her among them. He filled his own bowl, then sat down on the rock opposite me.

"So your father left it to you?"

"Yes, in a way. To tell the truth, my father and I really didn't get on well. We had a bit of a disagreement, shall we say, and I eventually had to leave. But when my father died, I realized that the place was mine. No one around to keep me out. So I came back, after wandering for most of my life, and have been here ever since. It's good to be back home."

He paused for a couple of bites, then reminisced a little.

“When I was young, it was my job to keep the place in order, to keep it all neat and trim. I really enjoyed that. In fact, it’s the one thing my father told me to do that I really liked. I did miss that while I was gone.

“You should have seen the place when I came back, though. Was it a mess! I think it went neglected the entire time I was gone. My father was never really good at taking care of things. That’s part of what led to the trouble between us. I’ve been working to get it back in shape ever since I returned. What do you think?”

He made a wide sweep of his arm, spoon in hand, as if formally presenting the place.

“Well, I don’t know what it looked like back then, but I’d say now it’s absolutely fabulous. If I didn’t know better, I would swear this is Paradise.”

He made no response, but a slight smile danced upon his lips as he looked down to his bowl for another spoonful.