

The Nightmare Forest

By Amelia

The first aid kit crashes to the floor and the bandages spill out, coating the tiles in paper and fabric. Avery sighs and drops to the floor, gathering up the bandages and placing them in the case. *All this for ten days?* she thought, placing the first aid kit in the backpack. Avery was hiking along the Canadian border to go to her sister Eve's house by the Lake of the Woods.

"I'll finish packing in the morning" she muttered to herself and then trudged upstairs to bed, leaving her unfinished backpack behind her.

The next morning, she tossed a big bag of food, some matches, silverware, a tent, and pots and pans into the bag. Avery swung the bulging backpack over her shoulder and walked out the door. She hopped in her car and drove to the start of the trail, where she would start hiking up to Eve's house. When Avery opened the door of her car and saw the start of the trail, she was immediately blown away by the door of vines that covered the beginning of the trail, and the glowing fireflies floating around like little specks of magic. It almost felt like the gateway was pulling her towards the woods. She pushed aside the vines that covered the gateway and lost consciousness.

Avery awoke in a dark forest, surrounded by green underbrush. She got to her feet cautiously. A bush rustled behind her. She jumped up and whipped towards the sound, picking up a long stick she had found on the forest floor. Suddenly, a voice spoke from the bush. Low. Fierce. *Human.*

“Welcome to nightmare forest.” The speaker was a boy, with ragged, dirty clothes, no older than 17.

“Nightmare forest?” asked Avery, puzzled.

“Yup” answered the boy, and as though it was an afterthought, added

“And once you come in, there’s *no getting out.*”

Trees whipped at her face as she ran away from the bush the boy had appeared in. After she had heard that she would live out the rest of her days in the nightmare forest, she had run off, trying to escape her terrible destiny to die. *Why couldn’t this be a normal hiking trip? Why can’t I see my sister?* She reached a tree and began to climb. Up and up she went, climbing away from this forest, away from what she feared would imprison her forever, but she never reached the sky, never got a glimpse of puffy white clouds. The trunk and the branches stayed the same thickness throughout the whole tree. Once she was about 150 feet up, she stopped and looked down. Her sight was muffled by hundreds of branches, but she could see the shapes quite clearly.

Monsters had surrounded the tree.

Avery wasn’t aware she was falling until a branch opened a gash on her side. Wind swirled around her and the looming shape of the monsters were drawing clearer as she grabbed onto a branch to break her fall, and felt the skin being ripped from her hands. The monsters had teeth like daggers, sharp, long, and yellowing. They had scales as thick as armor, and the color of swamp water on a stormy night. Their eyes were the color of blood with slits for pupils. As Avery stared at them, she felt the creature invade her mind, look through her eyes into knowledge beyond. Every cell in her body was screaming *RUN!* Yet she was frozen in time. Avery could

only stare as the monsters drew ever closer and the branches started cracking under her feet. A piercing scream came out of her mouth as she fell.

She awoke to the comforting sound of rain pouring down on Eve's cabin, with many quilts draped over her and hot chocolate in her hands. When Avery felt rain dripping down her back, she awoke to the real world. The rain was dripping on the tree leaves, she was draped in not the quilts of her vision, but the blanket she had packed. And the hot chocolate was a bowl of soup. She blinked. The nightmare forest came into clearer view. She was surrounded by about a hundred people of a range of ages, but they all had ragged and dirty clothing. Avery's weary brain formed one sentence. "Who are you?"

"We are the People of nightmare forest, but you can call us the Talaria." the boy from the bush answered.

The pain of the gash in her side was dwarfed by a pain in her left leg. Avery winced as the boy, Marco, the one who jumped out of the bushes, wrapped up her leg. He had told her the story, yet Avery begged for it again. "Please?"

And so they told her. When she had fallen from the tree, the Grunkles had moved in. They flipped Avery over, preparing to bite the back of her neck, when the Talaria showed up, having followed her out of the camp. They had fought the Grunkles off so Avery only got a shallow gash on her leg, although it was quite long.

"Yes, the scratch is shallow! I can hardly feel it at all!" Avery said sarcastically, the throbbing in her leg growing.

“Be grateful you’re alive.” said Jenna, a woman in her mid-thirties, tending to her own deep gash on her arm. It looked infected, the cut oozing pus.

“I’ve got something for that.” said Avery, grabbing her own backpack and getting out the first aid kit from a day before. Could that be right? Only a day? She got out the antibiotic cream from the kit and then wrapped Jenna’s arm up in sterile cotton.

“How do you get out?” asked Avery.

“You don’t. We’ve been here for a year now and there’s no way out. None.”

“Have you-”

“Yes. Half a mile from here there is a big stone wall and we can’t get over it. Stretches forever into the sky.” said Marco, fishing rod extended in a small pond, leaning against a tree.

Avery slid down to the base of a boulder. Next to her there was a bush with red berries, different than any kind Avery had seen before. She flung them away in disgust.

“Which weapon do you want? A sword, or bow and arrows?” asked Marco, now cleaning the fish and setting them to roast over a fire.

“Wha-! Bow and arrows, I guess.” said Avery.

Marco handed her a well-worn bow and arrows and called everyone over for dinner. The fish was wonderful, and Avery realized that was the only food she’d had since her breakfast of dry toast on the morning she’d departed. After she had eaten her fill, Avery fell asleep under her blanket, dreaming of home.

The next day, Avery asked Marco if she could go along the path to go and see The Wall for herself.

“Sure. but I’m sending you with Koz.” said Marco.

Koz turned out to be a teenage girl who carried a sword in one hand and a map with strange symbols in the other. They set off down the path, talking about the nightmare forest and its many dangers. It turned out that Koz mapped out the future, explaining the map with strange symbols. When they had hiked around half a mile, an eerie calling broke the silence and a dark blue bird with white spots like stars and an incredibly long beak soared into view.

“DUCK!!!!”

Koz and Avery ducked into a nearby bush and the bird flew right over them and speared a rabbit on its long beak.

“What was that?!?” exclaimed Avery, still a bit shaken by the whole Grunkle experience.

“It was a midnight bird. It was trying to skewer you on its beak.”

Avery gasped. They had reached The Wall. It stretched high above them, made of dark gray stone, covered in moss and vines, and as solid as a rock. It was hopeless. Avery slid down the cold stone wall and put her face in her knees. Suddenly, there was a rustle in the bushes. Avery and Koz jumped up, pulling out their weapons. Avery saw the eyes first. Bloodred, with slits for pupils. The eerie feeling that something was penetrating your mind.

A Grunkle.

Avery automatically positioned the arrow on the bowstring and aimed it at the grunkle's heart, but something stopped her. Koz's hand on her shoulder.

It was the last thing she was aware of until the Grunkle ripped Koz apart.

Something in Avery's mind was numb. The only thought she could form was *Run*. But she couldn't. Her legs did not want to cooperate with her brain. The Grunkle trotted away, and Avery rushed to the dying Koz. Blood trickled down her cheek and onto the ground as her chest became still. She was dead. Avery got a shovel from her pack and began digging a grave. The sun beat down on her back as she dug. Avery lifted the still Koz into the grave and said goodbye. Avery began the long hike back to the camp.

The last thing she wanted to do was to go out and say she had lost Koz, so she stayed hidden near the camp. She felt a shoot of hope go through her. Maybe if she could open The Wall, the rest of Talaria would forgive her. Avery eventually decided to hike back to The Wall and start trying to figure out its secrets. As she walked through the tall trees, Avery couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that she had only been here two days.

When she reached the high stone wall, she saw something peculiar. A small hole in the solid stone of The Wall, and began to climb up the wall, tying herself to a tree with a thick vine. *Maybe, if I can reach the hole, I could figure out how to get over or even widen it!* she thought, but when she climbed up The Wall, her heart ached.

They were right next to Eve's house.

Avery just stared at the place where she would give anything to be for just five minutes. Without knowing it, Koz had died right next to the very place Avery longed to be. She climbed down the vine and saw a Grunkle staring at her, half-concealed in the bushes. Bloodred eyes, piercing through her brain. And this time, there was no Koz to die for her.

But this Grunkle was strange. Instead of the dark swamp water green, it was a deep, resounding purple. It was trailed by two grunkles of a normal color and wore a crown of weeds, expertly woven. Avery could somehow sense that this grunkle was different, more powerful. The arrow was in the air before Avery was aware of it. The grunkle ducked before the arrow left the bowstring.

All of the anger Avery had been feeling towards the grunkles since Koz's death flung her at the grunkle and the tips of the arrows in her sheath stabbed into its heart. It let out a monstrous cry and sank to the ground. The other grunkles that had followed it bowed to Avery. A golden light shone from her sheath of arrows, wet with grunkle blood, blinding her.

Suddenly, there was a monstrous scraping of stone on stone.

The Wall had opened.

It was like a dream. Avery took a step out into the real world and felt a sense of relief overcome her. And there was Eve, standing on the front step of her cabin, holding out her arms out for a hug. Avery raced up the cabin steps and threw herself into her sister's arms. The people of Talaria raced out from The Wall and stared around in disbelief. Avery had done it! She had made it to Eve's house after all!

"What happened?" asked Eve. "You look like a nightmare!"

"You have no idea!" laughed Avery, home and safe at last.

The End