

2—An Enchanted Forest

Suddenly, I felt a slap across my forehead. “Wake up! Wake up! You sleep too much!”

A familiar voice filled my head, but I couldn’t place a name to its owner. I strained to open my eyes and rub my forehead, moaning to broadcast my displeasure.

“Who are you?” I said, looking around to find the voice. “And why are you in my room?”

“We are *not* in your room,” the voice snapped back.

“Where are we, then?” I asked.

“Wherever you want to be.”

The voice seemed both sincere and sarcastic. I opened my eyes to blinding light and saw I was no longer in my room. It looked as if I was in a jungle. Tall conifer trees surrounded me, their moss-laden trunks still wet with dew. Rays of light cut through the foliage in long slender slivers and reflected themselves like dancing, shimmering gold flecks in the river next to me. Flat-leaved ferns and low-growing vegetation covered the entire forest floor. In the distance, I could hear the sound of a waterfall. Oddly, there were no other sounds. In a place like this, I’d expected at least a few birdcalls or the random chirping of insects. Maybe even the occasional squabbles of monkeys.

I sat up so I might hear more clearly. Gathering myself into a meditation posture, I breathed in the fresh forest air and allowed my whole body to relax, allowing the cool sinking sensation to settle deep within my abdomen. Still, I only heard the sound of the waterfall, lamenting its pulsating beats.

I got up and followed the river. The smooth rocks felt cool to my bare feet. As I looked around, the whole forest was imbued in a magical hue: the colors were vibrant, beyond three-dimensional. I reached up to adjust my glasses and discovered I had not needed them. I was seeing these brilliant colors with my own eyes. They seemed alive, more real than high-definition. I touched a flowering tree and half-expected the image to dimple as my fingers create small ripples in the space-time continuum, opening a window to another world. My fingers met the velvet petals, and they yielded to my touch. Still, I checked my belt. Who knows, what if a subtle knife truly existed?

I searched the forest for signs of life, something to explain the unusual silence. There, in the tree high above, sat a family of monkeys, just looking at me. They resembled the fiery red and orange orangutans except they were slimmer, seemingly more agile had they stretched their long limbs and glided through the forest. As I looked at them, it appeared they were making decisions about me. Within the depths of their eyes, I saw intelligence and dignity, and their steady gaze relayed an ancient knowing, communicated through silence, witnessed by mutual respect. I bowed my head in acknowledgement. They lowered theirs.

I walked on, silently continuing my search. On another branch, I saw a gathering of birds, their feathers the colors of iridescent fire. They scrutinized my every step. Each movement I made registered in them as a turn of a head or a blinking of the eyes. One or two of them opened their beaks as if to speak, but the silence continued. It was not curiosity that drew them to watch over me; rather, I felt as if it were a silent blessing guiding me. Desperately, I wanted to speak to them, asking them where to go, which way to the waterfall. *Was there a way out of this forest?* I asked but received no answer, only a silence of peaceful abiding.

I stood there absorbing the silence. As I closed my eyes, I felt my hands lifted in a receiving gesture, opened arms, opened heart. A subtle surge of energy washed over me, cloaking me in gossamer of the finest silk.

I opened my eyes. The birds' feathers had now become golden blue like the shimmering of water in morning hues. I turned my head to look at the monkeys. They sat still as ever, the same colors as they were, almost bemused at my insignificant distress. I smiled back at them as if to excuse myself.

I felt an urge to slap myself silly: I needed to break the spell they had over me.

I do not like this. I do not want this. I am not comfortable with this. I thought to myself.

I stood still for a while, watching them, pleading with them, engaging in a private negotiation. They continued to sit still, certain of their position, radiating an unspoken truce. They saw right through me: I was more than naked and vulnerable, I was being accepted, not judged, not criticized, simply being seen. I felt a strange sense of love in their silent gaze. I sensed they felt what I was feeling; yet, instead of the volatility of emotions, theirs was a steady still voice of love.

I closed my eyes once more, allowing the silence to seep into me, allowing the wave of energy, the feeling of love, of acceptance, to cleanse me. In this peace, a snicker bubbled up from the deep recesses of my mind.

"You are so adorable for still believing in all this magic."

Instinctively, I covered my ears, but the mockery continued. I continued to hear, "so adorable, so adorable," despite covering my ears. The laughter roared even though nothing moved in the forest.

Leave me alone. I thought to myself.

"And yet you just spoke." It was the same voice that had taunted me earlier.

"I did not!" I defended myself. "I'm just going crazy hearing voices, that's all! I'm not having this conversation! I'm not saying another word!"

“But I just heard you,” the voice spoke with long drawn-out syllables.

“I was just babbling. I didn’t mean what I said.”

I opened my eyes to survey the forest, looking for the owner of the voice. The words it spoke were not harsh, but its directness was—almost unforgiving. It couldn’t belong to these monkeys or to those birds, for they sat still as ever, looking on with their kind and knowing eyes.

I stopped myself from thinking and allowed myself to sink into my feelings. Yes, I felt they all had kind eyes, even this snake that just slithered passed me. My eyes tracked the movements of the snake, curious of its destination. It wound itself up what looked like a yarrow tree. I wondered if it was a sign. *Should I follow it? Or should I let it be? Many had been led astray by such a snake.*

“You should not speak what you do not mean,” the voice spoke.

“I didn’t speak it,” I replied.

“You thought it, that’s just as good as speaking it.”

“Only if you are rude enough to steal my thoughts before I gave them to you.”

A laughter roared through the forest and ricocheted in my brain. “I am not rude. You rarely are aware of what you give away.”

“And what is it I give away?” I questioned the voice.

“You give away everything. Your thoughts, your feelings, your power. Tell me, is there anything of yours that you truly keep?”

I thought for a moment. The question wasn’t asking about my clothes or my car or my house. I negotiated with myself, uncertain why the voice would think I give away my thoughts, my feelings, much less my power. I felt persecuted by this unseen voice. My inability to think of any details did not mean I owned nothing of mine.

“Well, what’s the verdict?” the voice continued to boom in my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I’m not sure if I want to talk to you. Who are you, anyway?”

“I am you.”

“You are what! You are *not* me. You may have stolen a way inside my head, but I assure you, you are not me! I am not an unfriendly person, and I’m especially not unfriendly to myself!” My hands flailed toward my unseen assailant.

“Oh, ho! I’m unfriendly? I am only asking a simple—albeit direct—question.”

“That is not a simple question!”

Out of nowhere, I felt a sudden shift of energy like the weight of the atmosphere had collapsed, and someone had folded it into a blanket to be tucked away under the bed.

“Don’t worry,” said the voice with a loud yawn. “That was not gravity collapsing. I was only stretching my legs.”

“Are you a real person, then?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then why did you say you are me?”

“Because I am you.”

The voice did not say it, but I could hear the word “idiot!” finishing that last statement. I looked at the birds, I looked at the monkeys, and I looked at the snake coiled in the branches of the tree. Instinctively, I imagined a robe of light surrounding me. I called forth my shields, one over my heart, one ready at my hand. *Shields up, armor on*, I commanded silently. I curled my hand into a fist, feeling the grip of a sure sharp sword. I visualized a golden helmet, studded with jewels and diamonds, grasping for whatever material can offer me protection against this unwanted voice.

“Oh, put away the shields and the sword. You can keep the helmet if it makes you feel safer. It suits you,” the voice said, laughing. “Interesting touch of diamonds. Tell me: are they for fear or for enlightenment? Have you ever considered adding wings, like Hermes hat?”

“It’s a Hermes helmet, damn it! Not a hat.”

“Call it what you will, it’s the same sort of silliness.”

Infuriated at what felt like a lack of privacy, I yelled. “Show me yourself! If you are a real person, then show me yourself!”

“Suit yourself. I’m not certain you are ready to meet me.”

“If you are me, then I’ve already met you.”

“Let’s hope that’s the case,” the voice said with kinder tones.

I looked all around the forest. "I still don't see you."

"If you want to find me, follow the snake," the voice replied.

"Seriously? You are not kidding me."

"Seriously. Follow the snake. I sent it for you."