

INTO THE WHITE WOODS**Rashi Gautam***Stepping into the Unknown*

'Are you sure you want to do this?' asked the rather short boy for a sixteen year old. Or perhaps it was his plump appearance, with both cheeks sagged which made him look even shorter.

'You can keep asking the same question but our answer won't differ , alright?' replied Arianne with a grunt. 'We are going in and that is final.'

The boy scoffed and imitated her as soon as she turned to face a tall, lean, handsome boy, about seventeen who said, 'You can always go home if you want to, Fatty.'

'You know I have a name, right Tir?' he asked, irritated.

'Which nobody refers you with.' said the one sitting on a large rock nearby .

Arianne was growing more and more impatient at this unnecessary delay and thus put the topic to an end.

'Enough. Let's start lest someone sees us. Pick up your ass Ruben,' she said 'and get moving.' Ruben who was now halfway through his apple sighed before dusting his clothes off. 'Right then. Off we go in.'

'And I doubt we would be coming out.' muttered Fatty before following his friends into the white-woods. He hesitated to step his foot beyond the boundary which separated their village from the snow but hastened after a shout from Arianne and disappeared into the thick, white branches of the strong , big trees.

It had been months since they had tried something new. They were always curious about what laid beyond the boundaries of their uneventful village. A quiet, calm and peaceful life was something they did not enjoy. They got kicks out of the unknown, the dangerous. Thus it was only a matter of time when their thoughts would rest upon the forest where nobody was allowed to go in. And eventually, after much resistance from Fatty who thought this to be a little out of line, they all settled on a single decision - 'Into the Woods.'

The Unforeseen Tragedy

Three hours of walking and still everything was white and quite. The only noise was of their feet making a soft depression in the perfect, smooth snow with an occasional sound of cracking of the dried leaves beneath the white bed. They were enjoying the gentle cold breeze upon their faces. But this was not to last much longer.

It was almost dusk when they started a hunt to find a place suitable enough to spend the night and while they were in the process, the words 'Oh, God' left Ruben's mouth, loud enough for Arianne and Tir to hear. Although they were, at first, confused, they understood what Ruben meant when encountered with the sight before them.

'What are you doing here, Nod?' Arianne asked, frustrated. Tir just rubbed his forehead helplessly with his eyebrows knitted together.

'No, Aria', the ten year old boy said, 'the question is - What are you doing here? Off on another one of your stupid adventures? Well, what you don't know is that Mrs. Peckwood has had me spying on you for days. Oh you guys are so busted this time.'

Mrs. Peckwood was Arrianne, Tir and Ruben's aunt. The old woman had taken the responsibility of looking after them when her sister and her husband died due to illness. But the three were a handful and were always getting into some sort of trouble. Thus this time, she had her favourite nephew, along with his little sisters, Elly and Nelly who were three years younger than their brother, spy on them. They always followed him around and this time was no exception.

'So are you, little fellow.' said Tir.

Nod looked at him with a face scrunched in confusion. 'No, I am not. What are you talking about?'

'See, your plan would have worked if, and that is big if, you had informed Mrs. Peckwood before we entered. But now I am not so sure. You decided to follow us instead.' explained Tir, adding his last sentence with an amused laugh.

'And,' stated Arianne 'that makes you as much guilty of breaking the rules as we are.'

They kept messing around with him until Nelly squealed, 'What is this sound?' and stepped closer to Arianne. Everyone went silent and this time the sound was all too clear - a spine chilling howl. It was like the same ones they had heard on first entering the woods but at that time, the noises had been faint, almost impossible to hear.

The noises kept on drawing nearer. Little Nelly clung to Arianne while Elly and Nod hid behind Fatty , clutching his legs. The howls now turned into growls and they realized that they were coming from behind them. The kids were the first ones to turn around and scream at the top of their lungs. Arianne turned back slowly to see red eyes glaring right at her. It looked more like an oversized wolf whose body camouflaged almost completely with the white fluffy ground. She held Nelly even closer while drawing out her sword. Her actions were immediately imitated by her elder brothers. The wolf started towards Arianne and Elly and they simultaneously backed away from it but came to a sharp halt when Arianne heard the same but somewhat lower growls from behind her again. Now they were trapped and while they were wrestling with the idea whether to run away to the left into the trees or not , the mad solitary wolf started towards them and Ruben fell in the process of backing. Arianne , without a thought , rushed to help him but was met with an instantaneous yelp for help from a shaking Nelly as the wolf made its way towards her , and before Arianne could even think of doing anything , it tore apart the little girl's limbs leaving red all over the white ground. Screaming and crying , Nod and Elly ran into the trees to the left , followed by Fatty who went to retrieve them. Arianne did not know what to do , where to move. She kept standing there awkwardly with her eyes wide open at the pool of blood which laid at her feet. The mad wolf along with the other two moved towards them but Arianne could not move and just in time Tir and Ruben pulled her back. They both intended to run in Fatty's direction because surprisingly , the wolves had neither followed him nor the kids. But before they could spring the plan into action , an arrow came swooshing by , piercing right through the mad wolf's head. The other two got angry and ran along the way the arrow came but they were met with the same fate as their angry sibling / friend. The hoofs of horses now drew near when finally a group of fifteen men , heavily armoured appeared before them. Their commander came forward.

'Put down the sword , boy.' he said to Ruben. 'That arrow will pierce through your heart even before you can decide which way to swing your toy.'

'This was not meant for you , sir.' replied Ruben , relaxing his arms a bit.

'Indeed. But what are you doing in these parts of the woods? Don't you know these parts are off limits? None venture here , then why did you?'

'I am afraid we did not know , sir.' This time the reply came from Tir which was unusual as he never replied in such situations. He always let Ruben do the talking. Arianne looked at him through the corner of her eyes. Tir had mastered the art of maintaining a straight face while lying. It was difficult to tell his truths and lies apart.

'Well now you do. And it is a hard learned fact in your case I guess?' asked the commander,

looking at the blood stained ground and the remains of the little girl.

Arianne choked at the remark and tears welled up in her eyes. She casted them down in order to prevent the tears from falling but failed miserably. Ruben saw her sister's suffering.

'We will be on our way sir if you would be so kind as to lead us out of the forest. We got lost before we were cornered by the wolves.' he told the commander.

The commander seemed to be quite amused by this response. 'Leading your way out , eh boy? Sure.' He said turning to his men who roped the three of them and settled them on the horses along with themselves.

'Come on. Let us show them the way out.' shouted the commander before bursting into a maniacal laugh. And with this , they all rode the forest out.

The Death of Innocence

By the end of the ride their heads were dizzy due to the speed at which they had ridden. Through the large gate which had a lion's head in gold at the top , they entered the city - still on horsebacks. The place was quiet except a few people walking here and there , juggling between the shops. The houses were low built but all seemed clean. There was nothing magnificent about the place. They were led straight to the king. He was a strong built man , heavily bearded. Arianne had decided that she would talk to the king herself this time , to persuade him that they were not some kind of spies as the commander had pointed out during the journey. But the king , apparently was not the kind who would take any heed to what his prisoners had to say in their defence.

'Hild' , he said to the commander , 'take these three and have them thrown in the dungeons. I will decide later what to do with them.' he added through his teeth.

And just like that , they found themselves locked up in a large, dingy cell. There was not another soul except the three of them.

Two days had passed. They often talked about the incident in the woods , Nod and Elly, the times when they got Fatty into trouble and Mrs. Peckwood gave him a good scolding and then again about Nelly. That was an image they just could not get out of their minds no matter how hard they tried. Arianne always blamed herself for all that had happened. 'If it was not for me, Nelly would still be alive. We would still be at home. Fatty would still be here. Nod and Elly

would..' she would say and always end up crying. No words from her brothers could comfort her. She was the first one to come up with the idea about the woods and thus blamed herself for everything. Tir and Ruben too were worried about the kids and Fatty. Whether they were alive or not? Whether they made it back home or not? Did they tell Mrs. Peckwood what happened? Were they out in the woods searching for them? Such questions crossed their minds and it frustrated them as there was no way to find out the answers. They craved to get out, to feel the fresh cold breeze on their faces but could devise no plan clever enough to escape the heavily guarded dungeons.

The third day was yet the same. They were sitting in the dark, talking about the same things over and over again when the sounds of feet approaching interrupted them. Hild appeared out of the dark with a key in his hands. Without any word, he started unlocking the cell and opened the bar gate. They just looked at him. None got up. They knew it was their beheading. The day before, one of the guards had come to tell the news because the king still believed them to be the spies of one of their enemies. When neither of them stirred, the commander came into the cell.

'Get up.'

Why?' asked Arianne not meeting the commander's eyes.

'Because I said so.'

'You know I don't quite understand you. We are not some spies. We are mere villagers unfortunate enough to be found by you strange people. Why don't you believe us?'

'I do believe you.'

'You do?' asked Tir, sceptical.

'Well, if I didn't then I would not be here helping you to get out, would I?'

'You will help us?' asked Arianne.

The commander merely nodded. He was tense, Arianne noticed. He was not the same person who they had encountered in the forest. He had changed. When asked, no answer came from his side.

'What made you believe us now anyway? It was you who captured us in the first place. At that time you didn't believe a word we said. Why now?' asked Ruben.

'I have heard you talking over the past days. I believe you are not the spies our lord was referring

to. But it doesn't matter now. None of it.'

They were confused at the commander's answers. There was a hint of guilt in his tone, evident to the three of them but the reason behind that guilt remained unknown. Hild did not answer any follow-up questions thrown his way. He just kept on with his apologetic look. There was pity in his eyes but whether that pity was meant for them or not , they could not decide.

After standing there awkwardly for a few minutes , Hild motioned for them to follow him upstairs. That was their way out. No one guarded that door. Very few knew about that exit , according to the commander.

For the first time in four days they came out of that stinking , dark place. Arianne and her brothers struggled to let the bright day light enter their eyes. After awhile , the view was clear enough.

'Now , you must leave immediately. Just go straight into the woods. Do not lose the path and you should be able to...' Here Hild hesitated for a moment. '... You should be able to ..uh.... reach your destination.'

Which was at first just a doubt was now a certainty. Arianne was now sure that something had happened and judging by the commander's behaviour - it was something bad. But there was no point in asking him. He wouldn't answer any of their questions. Before they left , Arianne heard him saying 'I am sorry'. But when she turned to look at him , he was already gone.

After a day and a half's walk , a few more tears while passing the way where they had lost Nelly and a cold , hungry night later , they finally reached home. Only , it was not the same they had left four days ago. The houses were burnt. Swords and arrows were thrust inside the inhabitants' bodies - adults and children alike. Horrified by the sight before them , they rushed to their own house , avoiding the corpses which lay in between.

Arianne was the first one to open the door. With shaking legs , she made her way inside only to find Fatty , Nod and Mrs. Peckwood lifeless. She collapsed into the floor - sobbing uncontrollably when she realized that there was no sign of Elly. She started to search the house frantically. She finally remembered the little girl's favourite hiding spot. And there was Elly , sitting in the corner of the kitchen cupboard - her legs folded , her head buried in her lap and her hands stained with blood. Now she understood what Hild had meant but what use was it now anyway.