

# *THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

*(A legend?)*

By

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I was so tired that evening... Exhausted, in truth, after a series of exciting, successful, but also demanding meetings with my agent in London, and the movie execs who had bought the rights to my latest novel. *Afghan Warrior*, the story of a US war photographer who falls in love with a local Taliban fighter, was going to end up on the big screen at long last. Laced with my fatigue was a deep sense of elation... I was delighted. Now, meetings all done, I was again on my own time for the next few days. Renewal time. I almost laughed at the thought of how long it was since I'd afforded myself some of that precious elixir, and as freezing rain began to lash over my car windshield with increasing ferocity, I decided to stop for the night. I had reached the village of Calke, in the county of Derbyshire. The fact that I just happened to pass right by a traditional, quaint, lit-up pub advertising rooms and vacancies seemed like too good to be true. Leaning over the steering wheel in anticipation, I checked out the inviting entrance, freshly-painted it seemed, and the tidy windows above, which had to belong to the rooms advertised. It looked pretty good on first inspection, although I was always careful with pubs. The last thing I wanted was to end up at a dreary, dingy establishment, a second residence for the local drunks... A cheerful sign outside the entrance door read:

*“Welcome, weary traveller! Come rest here a while with us... Enjoy our organic meats and award-winning ales, soothing cuppas, and home-made apple pie...”* This lovely invitation, and the five-star accommodation rating added to it finally convinced me that this would be a good place to spend the night. I really could not face many more hours of driving at night on the motorway in this weather, and I was especially wary of all the warnings of black ice and even snow that I kept hearing on the radio. Resolutely, I turned into the car park.



Walking inside the pub from the harsh weather outside was wonderful. What a treat! The large open fire in the corner immediately caught my eye, as well as the table for one tucked in by the side of the stone fireplace. Interested, as I allowed my eyes to roam, I also noticed gleaming floors of polished oak throughout, a few marks and scuffs only adding to character and authenticity. Three round, heavy wooden beams crossed the attractively low ceiling, and I was not sure if the room was dimly lit, or not at all by electric lights... There were many candles on the three tables arranged inside the snug space; real candles too, not those ugly tea-lights they sell in bulk at Tesco's. Small copper lanterns sat inside windowsills shaped in such a way as to highlight the thickness of the walls. Outside, a bitter wind howled and screamed like a mad wounded witch... But in here, you could not hear a whisper of it.

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

I stood transfixed as warmth slowly seeped through my bones and removed a first layer of exhaustion. *Ah... Heaven!*

“Good evening,” a deep male voice said. “Welcome to the Oak Inn.”

I turned around, surprised, and saw no one. Then, I heard a knowing giggle.

“Over here, lady.”

*Lady?* I thought. I was more used to people calling me Ms, or Miss... I was not sure that the term ‘*lady*’ could be applied to me either, to be fair. I was a fit forty-five-year old more at ease in the gym than the boudoir. I never wore make-up, heels, or dresses; my nails were short and blunt; I carried a small army assault pack in lieu of a handbag. I was sharp and effective in looks and manner, and if I had not felt so tired, I may have sneered at being called a lady. The word seemed otherworldly as well. Then again, it did rightly fit the place; this pub, or the Inn, as the man had called it, pretty perfectly. I finally spotted the owner of the voice as he walked out from behind the bar.

“John Barnsby, at your service.”

He offered his hand to me and a warm smile as well. He was what modern people who are afraid to use words for their intended purpose might call a small person, or if you happened to be me, a dwarf; no more than 3’5 in height, definitely not as tall as the bar that he had been hiding behind.

“Sorry,” he chuckled, as I shook his hand. “A little trick I like to play.”

His grip was strong, and his deep-blue eyes twinkled as he grinned up at me again. I laughed in return, feeling instantly at ease with the man who turned out to be the owner of the place.

"Takes more to scare me off," I said.

"Aha. Good." He nodded approvingly. "A room and a good meal, I take it?"

I smiled. Probably not hard to guess.

"Yes, please," I replied.

He gave me a big old-fashioned iron key to Room #3, and I went up quickly to drop my bag. I was as taken with my bedroom as with the rest of the Inn. It was simple and inviting with its white-washed walls, the fresh linens and plump pillows on my comfortable double-bed, a fragrant cinnamon and rose-scented pot-pourri in the corner, and its own fire... There was no TV, and not even one of those dreadful plasticky alarm radio-clocks with glowing red numbers. This pleased me no end! Smiling to myself, I had a quick shower, changed into comfortable clothes, and headed back downstairs. Just after six o'clock, a few more people started to arrive; an old couple on their own, and a young one with a (thankfully) quiet baby. By that time, I was happily ensconced at that table for one in the corner, enjoying the warmth from the fire and the general ambience of the Inn. The local beer, crafted by trappist monks from a nearby monastery, was delicious; and John understood my wish to take it slow, and '*spend the time*', as I told him. I was so delighted to find that there was no phone signal inside the pub! He laughed when I told him.

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

"It is the spirit of the Inn," he approved. "Ancient as the oak... Quiet, and still... Although not everyone feels at ease here; you know that?"

He held my gaze, his eyes intent as he peered into my face, and I felt somehow the weight of the question. Was this perhaps a peculiar thing to say to a random customer like me? Surprised, I raised a curious eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

He broke into a smile.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you this," he mused.

"What?" I pushed, staring hard at him over the rim of my pint glass.

"Well..." He seemed to hesitate, but only for a second before launching into an excited speech. "You see, there's the ley lines to begin with. If this was Egypt, people would be building pyramids on this site, ha! We have the sacred geometry in these walls, of course, which is why phones don't work inside the Inn. We are the keepers of the old legend, and we have the tree itself, which can be found at the end of the path that starts behind the beer garden. I don't usually need to tell people to stay away from there, they always feel it. And then, there's the brook that flows red twice a year, for Samhain and Beltane, without fail. People will tell you it is due to iron oxide in the ground, although we know better... If you're lucky, you may even hear her."

"Who?" I asked, frowning now in confusion.

"The girl," he whispered with a knowing wink. "The girl who went inside the tree."



There were only three things on the menu, and by then, I was totally under the charm of the Oak Inn and its quirky owner. I looked above my head as I sipped more ale. *Three beams*, I reflected, feeling both amused and curious. *Three tables... Three items on the menu... I'm staying in Room #3...* Sacred geometry; how interesting this all was. I was determined to catch John once the other tables had gone, and make him tell me more about the legend that he had only alluded to before. The man was such a tease... I smirked as I pulled my notebook out of my bag and jotted down the date and a few lines: *I am staying the night at a haunted Inn!!! Quirky dwarf is Maître d'. Pagan vibes and spooky stories... Major snow storm outside. Best beer I ever had. Quote: "Not everyone feels at ease here" (JB) !!!!* Well, I for one sure did... The whole ambience of the Inn was delicious to me, its vibe as pleasantly intoxicating as the aroma of the rabbit stew that soon landed in front of me, delivered by a smiling John with a promise to come and sit with me later, and talk, if I wanted to.

"For now, enjoy," he said.

"Oh, I will..."

I certainly needed no encouragement. The stew came in a rough wooden bowl, with a lovely wooden spoon, and already-buttered thick chunks of what I suspected had to be home-made bread. The meat fell off the bone, and the stew was just the perfect consistency, fragrant with lots of fresh herbs; thyme, rosemary, a hint of strategic pepper...

Again, this was pure heaven, and I sighed in appreciation. Hours must have passed. Or maybe not... I don't know. I did not see the young couple and the baby leave, but I did notice the old man and woman when they stood up to go. I waved them goodbye as they walked past my table, and found it slightly odd that they did not even seem to see me. *Oh, well... Never mind.* I felt pleasantly drowsy now, and John came over to ask how I was doing.

"Wonderful," I declared. "And now that everybody else has left, are you going to come sit with me, and tell me the legend of your ghost?"

He nodded, and just asked me to wait for two seconds while he collected '*the essentials*'. I sat waiting for him in an almost torpor, and burst out laughing when he came back with said must-have items: two plates of gorgeous-looking apple pie and a dusty bottle of something that I could not identify. He passed it to me so I could smell it.

"Fruity alcohol?" I said.

"Red berry brew from the oak wood," he replied.

"Home-made?"

"Of course."

It was dark as blood when he poured it, but sweet and warm when I drank it, and it suited well the taste of apple pie. Meanwhile, John rested his long-fingered hands on the table, and glanced politely yet enquiringly at my notebook.

"I'm a writer," I volunteered. "I write fiction novels."

"How delightful," he exclaimed. "A real bard!"

"Yes," I chuckled. "In another time, I probably would have been."

I told him that I enjoyed being called a bard a lot more than a *'lady'*, and his eyes twinkled in amusement.

"Then you should feel a true kinship with her," he stated. "That is good, writer. For the girl who went into the tree also did not like to be called a lady. And yet, as the King's only daughter, they tried like hell to raise her as one..."

I could smell a good tale coming, and as I reached for my glass of red berry brew, sweet-smelling logs crackled and spit in the fire, and snow covered the Inn in a layer of quiet dust.

"The girl was wild," he added.

"Good for her," I growled.

John smiled at me.

"They also said she was a witch."

I rolled my eyes, and his grin widened.

"As children, Esther and her twin brother Henri were inseparable. Of the two, he was the quiet and reserved one; probably would have been more at ease spending time in the library than outside exploring the countryside. I think that he only went along on Esther's escapades because he loved her so much. She was unstoppable. She liked to fish, hunt, run, and ride the ponies that roamed free across the hills at the time. She knew all the families of the shepherds and the game-keepers in the area, and she spent more time with them than living under her own roof. Everyone liked Esther."

I was already under her spell myself, to be fair...

"Why did they think she was a witch?" I asked.

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

“Because she knew so much about herbs; plants, roots, mushrooms, you name it... She had a knack for knowing which ones to mix together into a drink or an unguent, and which to use to help the local people with their aches and pains.”

“She was a healer,” I said, pleased.

“Indeed, she was that,” John agreed with a thoughtful smile. “Then, one day, her father decided to marry her off to a rich old merchant from the Scottish Highlands. Esther tried to run away for good, and her brother helped her, but the father suspected such a reaction. The two siblings were caught at the gates. In punishment, and as a hard warning to Esther, her father killed her brother.”

“He murdered his own son?” I exclaimed, startled.

John nodded heavily.

“He did... Took out his sword and just sliced his head right off the top of his neck. Legend has it that Esther let out a raging wounded cry that echoed all the way across the valley, and to the next village... She ran off. The king and his soldiers jumped on their horses. My God, the girl was fast! She flew across the meadow, and went on toward the woods. She reached the brook. By that point, the king had unleashed his pack of hunting dogs. Esther kept going but it was only a matter of time before the wild beasts and the king’s men caught up with her...”

I watched John’s face grow tight as he recounted the tale. His eyes were wide now, glassy and unfocused. He breathed a little harder too, so caught up was he in the story. *How odd*, I thought. *He sounds like he’s remembering...*

John startled me suddenly by banging his fist hard on the table.

“And then, guess what she did?” he roared.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged, unhappy at being made to jump like that. “What?”

“She stopped by the ancient oak to face them all. She stood there in front of the majestic tree, with her long dark hair blowing in the wind, tears running down her cheeks for her brother, and her deep grey eyes blazing in fury. She raised her right hand, and the dogs stopped all at once.”

John gave a low chuckle this time, grinning in genuine admiration it seemed.

“Now, you’ve never seen a more snarling, threatening bunch of dogs as those creatures, but they stopped. Esther only had to raise her hand, and they flattened down on the ground in front of her, whimpering like puppies. And the soldiers did not go any further either. They formed a circle around the tree and Esther. My, did she look formidable!”

Again, I was taken aback by the way he spoke... Then, I almost chuckled. *Talk about a bard*, I mused. He was one hell of a good storyteller. He sure had me on the edge of my seat.

“What happened then?” I asked.

“She turned to her father,” he said. “The skies went dark and a furious wind rose. Thunder echoed around the hills... The air literally crackled with electricity. Some of the dogs began to howl, and she laughed. She *laughed*.”

I felt a shiver run through me as I imagined the scene, and also deep sympathy and curiosity for the woman.

"The king looked strangely subdued and reluctant as well, all of a sudden," John continued. "All of them could sense her power. And then she fixed her cold gaze on her father, and whispered a curse. After that, she..."

"What? What did she say?" I interrupted.

John fixed me with a half-smile, studying me.

"You want me to repeat the curse?" he challenged.

"Oh, come on," I insisted impatiently. "What did she say?"

I wanted to know. I just had to know! He gave a quiet exhale, and nodded in assent. I grabbed my notebook, my hands trembling and not sure why, but ready to jot every word down.

"She said..." John's voice dropped deeper, to a solemn whisper. *"I command the spirits of the warm Earth mother, and the powers of the endless Sky father... The Ancestors of the Forest, and the Spirit of the Oak. And you: my Father, my King; I damn you to hell for all eternity. I curse you to the ends of the worlds, in this realm and all the realms. As Thunder is my witness, for my brother and for his soul, may the dazzling light of the Gods bring an end to your wretched life!"*

I almost tore a hole through the paper with my pen as I scribbled furiously.

"Geez..." I murmured under my breath. "I can feel it."

"You can feel her power, eh?" John said. "You can feel that heat pulsing through your bones? The raging fury and the awful sorrow laced with her words...?"

I nodded, speechless. I could feel it, yes! And I was elated.

“What then?” I pressed him, feeling breathless, my heart racing. “What happened to Esther?”

Oh, I so wished that I could have seen this! Legend or not, it was the most enthralling story I had ever been told in my entire life. John refilled my glass and pushed it into my hand before answering.

“The most astonishing crack of thunder tore the valley open,” he said. “And the skies parted! A sizzling strike of pure lightning flashed across the air and struck the king. It went through his chest, burned his heart to cinders! A full panic ensued. The dogs were screaming just like human beings... Rain began to fall, thick and fast across the plain, and red too. One soldier later said that it was her tears, Esther’s tears flooding the meadow, and they were red like blood on account of the pain that she felt at the loss of her brother... And then she turned, and slipped inside the tree. She went into a hollow space into the trunk. She just walked in there, and turned back for one last look. One last time, she surveyed this realm, as she called it. Then, she was gone.”

John went quiet, and I was taken aback at this abrupt ending.

“What happened to her?” I asked, puzzled. “Where did she go? Tell me!”

He smiled, nodded gently.

“She went inside the tree; blended her soul with the spirit of the oak.”

I was flabbergasted, and he laughed at the expression on my face.

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

“To this day, local folk remember the legend of Esther. They say that you can see her riding her wild pony on the hills when it’s misty... People who’ve got lost in the woods around Calke swear that a woman with long dark hair and intense grey eyes appeared out of nowhere, and led them to safety. And every time it rains, it always pours near the oak in the back, like it has its own weather system.”

“Esther’s tears,” I murmured.

“Esther’s tears for her brother,” John sighed. “And the brook runs red...”



Afterwards, John said that he had really enjoyed spending the evening with me, and that my meal and all the drinks were on the house.

“It was a pleasure sharing a good legend with you, writer,” he concluded, and with an amused wink, bid me good night, and sweet dreams.

I walked back along the corridor toward the stairs that led to my bedroom, and I noticed the exit, and the sign, for the first time. The old wooden door marked *To the Oak* was an invitation if ever I had received one... Subtle, sure; yet, bloody irresistible. I pushed the door open and popped my head out to test the weather. It had snowed heavily earlier, but now all was quiet and still. A full moon glinted above, illuminating the tables and benches in the beer garden. At the back, I spotted the start of the small path that John had mentioned to me before. It was not even too cold out...

Resolutely, I stepped outside, drawn to the narrow path as if by a strong magnet, and before I realised it, I was on my way, well on my way. Going in deep; deeper and deeper into the wood. I could see just fine, and fresh fallen snow crunched softly under my feet. *Esther...* The girl who went inside the tree was on my mind. A series of mages of her extraordinary story kept flashing through my head, and those mad words that John had spoken at my request, the words of Esther's curse, also resonated within the walls of my psyche. I imagined the untameable young woman; I got a sense of her devastating anger, of her pain. I saw her with vivid clarity, with her piercing grey eyes and wind-swept hair. A hunter, a witch... A sister, and a healer. I wanted more of this story, and to see the tree of the legend.

I kept going until I heard the soft babble of the brook at the far end of the path, and emerged into a clearing in the woods. And there the stream was, almost hidden into the long coarse grass and in between patches of moss. I squatted down to see better, and to listen to its sweet song. *It's been so long...* I smiled to myself. It was a while since I'd been alone in the forest, but I used to crave the solitude of the woods, and the deep sense of calm that always came from spending time among the trees. I stared for a while at the stream of ice-cold water that murmured in its cradle of snow, so brilliantly white in contrast to the deep green of the moss, and the occasional sparkle from an errant ray of moonlight falling on top of it.

"Wow. This is so beautiful," I sighed, smiling in deep pleasure.

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

Then I stood, looked up, and froze.

“Oh...” *Well; Talk about beautiful, eh!*

I grinned again in pure wonder. This magnificent oak drenched in moon light appeared to shimmer in the night like a picture stolen from a book of tales. I saw its strong and sturdy trunk, as comforting as a promise in all its regal strength. I took in the ancient gnarled and twisted root system that spread from the base, and extended all across the path, diving under the brook to resurface into the clearing. *Grounded...* Yes. And I wanted to touch the tree. I stepped forward before even recognising the thought. I stared up at yellow, orange, dark-maroon leaves. *Weird to see such colours so late in the year...* I laid my hands against the bark, pressed my palms into the tree. *Warm...* I am not ashamed to say that I tried to hug this oak, but it was too big for the circle of my arms. I began to go around it. I was looking for it; the opening. *She went inside the tree. Esther...* And there it was on the other side, facing a tiny pond.

“Pure magic,” I said out loud, and laughed, as I once again looked up toward the sky.

Never before had I seen so many stars, and never so brilliant, against a backdrop of such pure black. The night felt alive.

“Potent,” I murmured. *Isn't it?*

Yes, it was the word. I looked into the opening inside the quiet tree, feeling strangely shy all of a sudden. What was it that John had said earlier about never needing to tell people to stay away? I shivered and looked sharply over my shoulder, just checking to make sure that I was alone.

Whatever John had meant to convey, it was too late to ask now anyway, and the urge to step inside the tree suddenly seized me. I did, instantly. I slipped right into the opening, and stood with my back pressed against the far rounded end. The bark was lighter from this side, rough and coarse, but again, warm... It was quiet in there, and so amazingly warm. I closed my eyes for a second, and it was then that I heard it. A woman's laugh, deep and warm, and as crystal clear as the water from the stream. My eyes shot open, and my heart almost leaped out of my chest. *No!* Panic filled my throat. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I raised my hands in front of me. I pushed as hard as I could. I just felt heavy, hot bark under my fingers, and realised what must have happened. The tree had closed in on me. *What???* It was crazy to think such a thought, but I was locked in. Locked inside the tree. *John...* If I yelled loud enough, he might hear me, I reasoned. My mind was fluttering on the edge of madness. *This can't be! No, no, no! I can't be locked in here!* I drew in a breath and prepared to scream, but then I felt it. I felt the oak sigh in a great big shuddering exhale... A flutter against my back. I whirled around and looked, peered into the darkness until my eyes adjusted, and I could make out a tunnel. *There is a tunnel inside the oak...?*

"Come..." a voice whispered. "Inside..."

The voice was female, steady; amused, even? Now my natural curiosity won over any fear or hesitation. After all, this was the reason I had come, wasn't it? At least, I had to be honest with myself on that. I had come here wanting to go inside the tree; I had come here looking for her. *Esther...*

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

For a moment, I stood rooted in place, staring and listening hard, with my heart pounding.

“Is that you?” I murmured.

No words came in response, but I could hear the same laughter, teasing and enticing, far away in the distance... I started to move forward, impatient now. Again, came this sigh, but this time it felt reassuring to me, and it was as if the oak was pleased. I could feel it, sense it. I kept going deep inside the tree, and as I went, the tunnel narrowed. Now I could see deep lines coursing along the sides. They reminded me of the venation pattern of a leaf, and as the thought occurred to me, I realised that it was correct; I was looking at veins... I touched the walls softly, respectfully. More like membrane now than hard bark, and I felt the tree respond with a shiver. It was like touching a cat. *Alive... Yes.* The further down I went, the better I could hear a steady hum, and a sure rhythm, like a heartbeat. In the distance, there was light. *Light at the end of the tunnel,* I mused ironically. *Am I going mad? I can't really be inside this tree... Right?*

“Almost there, writer,” the voice encouraged.

I stumbled in my haste to finally reach her, and at last, I emerged into a wider space. This was a cave where all the roots of the ancient oak merged into stone. Here, the tree became something else. I stepped to the opening, blinking in surprise, disorientation, and sheer amazement at the incredible sight that greeted me. On my right were fields, meadows, wild flowers as far as I could see. On my left, a thick forest of deep-green trees and more powerful oaks...

In front of me in the distance, I could make out the outline of tall mountains capped with the purest snow, and in the cloudless skies high above my head, a huge eagle flew lazy circles. I had researched the Elysian Fields for a novel once, learned all about the paradisiac realm of ancient Greek mythology... And by now, I must tell you, reader: I was convinced with every fibre of my being that I must be there. And if I was, it could only mean one thing. *Am I dead?* I wondered. *And where... Where is she?*

"Esther...?" I whispered.

Suddenly, I became aware of a deep rumble in the earth under my feet. The ground was shaking. I turned around, startled, and again froze in place at the staggering sight of a huge, powerful black horse and its rider coming right toward me in a furious gallop. I stared, mesmerised. The horse was a perfect amalgamation of supple muscles glistening under vibrant skin, dark as night. The rider seemed fully at one with her mount... She rode with total abandon; no saddle, no helmet, no fear. I began to smile even as horse and rider bore down on me at a thunderous clip. She wore dark linen leggings, a white tunic, and lace-up leather boots that stopped midway up her calves. Dark-chestnut hair, loose and wild; blazing grey eyes; full lips and high cheekbones currently flushed pink from the ride. She looked magnificent... Truly like an apparition, and I did notice a swirl of mist around her as she brought the stallion to a stop in front of me, and hit me with a razor-sharp glance.

"You came through the oak. You went inside."

It was not a question, and I just nodded blankly. She smiled at me, and her eyes sparkled.

“Good for you, writer.”

She had a lovely, deep, husky voice.

“Esther?” I murmured. “Is that you?”

A flash of impatience crossed her eyes and she did not reply. Instead she just leaned forward, close to the horse’s luxurious mane, and extended a strong arm out to me.

“Come.”

I grabbed onto her and pulled myself up behind her. Now I was sitting on a horse for the first time in my life, and there was nothing to hold on to except her. I did so. Wrapped my arms tightly around her waist, and pressed myself into her back. *No shame, eh...?* I could almost hear my new friend John laughing in my ear. *Shut up*, I thought.

“Good,” was all the woman said.

Off we went, just walking now, thankfully; although I was keenly aware of the power of the animal we rode, and I could tell that he was ready and raring to go. But Esther, for I was sure it was her, did not allow it. On and on we rode, across the fields, into the forest, through an ever-changing landscape and fast-flowing skies. I noticed that the eagle was still there, as if it was following us.

“Is this real?” I murmured. “Or am I dreaming?”

“Yes,” my companion replied, and I laughed.

Oh, she felt real to me... Hot skin, hard muscles, and that tangled mass of hair that smelled so sweetly of pine and moss, and wet grass after the summer rain.

“Are you the girl who went into the tree?”

She continued to ignore me, and I noticed the autumn leaves tangled in her hair. She wore a necklace of bark. The thought crossed my mind that maybe she *was* the tree... I remembered John's words: "*She went inside the tree; blended her soul with the spirit of the oak.*" She turned sharply to stare into my eyes, and as I looked back intently at her, peering into those brilliant grey orbs, a slow smile came to her lips.

"I am spirit," she said. "That is true."

And on those words, she rested a single hot hand on my thigh, leaned forward, and unleashed her stallion. I held on to her for dear life as we went flying... Literally. Through the forest, high on a mountain path, higher still; over the peaks, across the sky, into the blue; through a sea of intense white clouds. Higher, faster and lighter, until we reached the top of another mountain. There, we stopped, and she jumped off the horse. I tried to do the same but only managed to land in a clumsy heap at her feet. *Humph*. She grabbed me by the arm and lifted me up easily.

"Look," she said.

I stared at the valley below us. Fields, forest, streams, mountains... A world of dreams and magnificent beauty.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"It's the world," she replied. "I rule here. Inside."

The eagle came to land in front of us, and she glanced at me sharply.

"He's come for you; you know?"

"For me?" I repeated, charmed.

"The eagle has a message for you," she said. "Are you paying attention, writer?"

*THE GIRL WHO WENT INSIDE THE TREE*

“Yes.”

She laid her hand over my shoulder and stared deep into my eyes.

“When you reach the empty place with all the silver streams running through it, just wait,” she said. “You will think it safe. But you should wait. The eagle sees far. You must wait.”

I just nodded. I felt sleepy, and didn’t know why. She held my gaze.

“Not many people find the entrance to my tree,” she mused. “Not many people dare to go inside like you did.” She pressed her open palm over my chest, and I felt liquid heat fill my heart. “I am spirit, yes. I am Esther, yes. I am you, the girl who went into the tree. Yes...”

She sounded both fierce and tender at the same time, and now I felt properly dizzy.

“But what... Who...?” I mumbled.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “And now, you must go back.”

“But I don’t want to go back so soon,” I managed to argue weakly. “I want to say with you...”

She smiled, and leaned over me.

“Oh, but I am always here,” she murmured. “Inside...”

She pressed her lips against mine, and made my spirit dance. This was heat, lightness, and joy all wrapped into one delicious kiss. *Alive... Yes!* Sadly, before I could react, and all too soon, it was over. I felt her slip something into my hand, and she whispered in my ear, making me shiver.

“Close your eyes, writer. Remember the eagle.”



I woke up with a start, breathing hard, and looked wildly all around me. *Where was I?* It slowly came back. *Of course, yes...* I was upstairs in my room at the Oak Inn. Feeling disoriented, hot and thirsty. *Esther...* I touched my fingers to my lips, and closed my eyes for just a second. *She kissed me...* I felt my face warm up at the memory. My God, what a dream! I got up and dressed quickly, packed my bag, and ran downstairs in search of John. I could not wait to tell him about this! But as I walked into the dining room, I came to an abrupt stop. *What happened here?* Last night, this room had felt like an enchanted refuge, with the candles burning bright, the lanterns in the walls, and the warmth from the fire... Now, it was all changed. It looked just like a dreary hotel lobby, the kind I had been trying to avoid. Gone were all the beautiful gleaming floors, replaced by a layer of stained, thin carpet. I frowned in consternation. Had I really been so tired last night that I had imagined something different? I sat on a stool at the bar, and stared at the old box of corn flakes and half-empty jug of milk on the side. *Breakfast?* I wondered. *Gosh...* A woman came out of the back room, saw me, and gave a weary nod.

"Morning," she muttered. "Sorry, we're out of bread."

"That's okay," I shrugged. "Is John around?"

"Who?"

"John... The owner?"

"I'm the owner, love," she said. "No one else here."

She went to get me a coffee. It was lukewarm, tasted of nothing. I only had one sip of it before deciding not to bother. I kept noticing other jolting details about the room. The three beams on the ceiling were fake plastic... The fireplace was boarded up.

"Haven't used that thing in twenty years," the woman said when I enquired. "A fire, you say? Nah, we don't do that anymore. Too much cleaning up after."

She was watching me like she thought I'd had one too many the night before... But I knew I had not. I knew it! I paid for my room, grabbed my bag, and walked out the door. *No snow...* It was all gone. Had I dreamt that as well? Feeling disturbed, wondering, I glanced in the direction of the beer garden. *I have to be sure of this...* I went in and to the back, where the small inviting path had been, and was surprised to find a heavy metal fence blocking my way. I stared at it for a while, then turned around, and almost ran back to my car. I got behind the wheel. All of a sudden, I could not wait to leave this place. In the cold light of day, the pub appeared old and decrepit, almost threatening. I looked for the cheerful sign that had made me go in the night before... It was gone, just like the snow. Shaking my head, puzzled, I turned the radio on to restore a sense of normality, and drove out of the car park.

"Spooky shit," I murmured under my breath.

Five miles down the road, I felt better somehow, and decided that this must all be a case of too much time spent at my desk, and not enough on renewal time. I must really be in need of a holiday for my mind to play such tricks!

Daydreaming about a white Florida beach, or the inviting streets of the Garden District in gorgeous New Orleans, I began to make plans inside my head, as I waited patiently for the traffic to get moving again in the middle of gigantic road works. A set of temporary lights was in place and just slowed everything down, but I was nice and warm inside the car. *Maybe I could fly into Miami, hire a car, and drive to New Orleans*, I figured. I was excited at the idea, as I finally got to slip into pole position at the lights. Now I could see they were building a new set of tracks for the local tram. I grew thoughtful, suddenly. Where had I heard train tracks mentioned recently? It hit me as the light turned to orange. *Metal tracks, like silver streams running through empty space.* The guy behind me let out a furious honk when I did not immediately shoot forward. In a trance, I did not react. *You will think it safe, but you should wait. The eagle sees far.*

“Oh, bloody hell,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

The light had just turned green, and I should go now. My foot hovered over the accelerator, but I hesitated. It came again, the flutter of a thought. *You must wait, writer.* Only another second had elapsed when a huge articulated lorry flew through the intersection at maximum speed.

“Shit!” I exclaimed out loud.

No doubt that guy had ran the light on the other side. If I’d gone on green, he would have smashed into me and probably, definitely killed me. I shot a quick glance behind me. The impatient guy was no longer yelling at me to go. I put the car in gear and went carefully across the junction, then found a spot to pull over and stop as soon as I could.

My hands were shaking. I was covered in sweat, and my legs trembled. I thought I might fall.

“Fuck!” I swore out loud. “I could have died...”

Along with the realisation, an avalanche of memories flew into my mind. *‘I am spirit... I am you.’* Vivid images of the magnificent landscape; flashes of Esther and her pure grey eyes; holding on tight to her as we rode the powerful stallion. *Are you paying attention, writer?’* My hear raced as I recalled her last words to me; *‘Remember the eagle...’* I was trembling still, but it was from excitement now, because I remembered something else. Right before the end, she had slipped something in my hand. *What was it?* I plunged my fingers into my pocket and immediately felt it. Something round... Soft and smooth. I pulled it out and stared hard at it, as heartfelt tears came to my eyes. *I didn’t imagine this,* I thought triumphantly. *It was real!* Indeed, I was holding an acorn in my hand.

“This was no dream,” I murmured, and tightened my fingers over it. I was aching to go back, to see her again, to kiss her. “Esther,” I said. “Spirit of the oak; are you there?”

There was a light gust of wind, and I felt warmth like a gentle caress across the back of my neck. Somewhere far, far away, a woman laughed.

*Are you paying attention, writer?*

*I am always here.*

*Come, find me;*

*Inside...*

*NATALIE DEBRABANDERE*

*THE END...*



*Thanks for reading!*

*Nat x*