

## Fear of the Step



Never swim in the forest. Never run in the shade of the trees. If you find a path, do not follow it. If you lose your shoes you must walk on the paths. Never lose your shoes.

Vale ran barefoot down the path. She carried her moccasins in her hands. Her hair was still wet, dripping down the back of her dress. It dried slowly in the shade of the trees.

She laughed aloud, though there was no one to hear her. She remembered what Feather always said about swimming in the forest, and she laughed. Vale had learned long ago that her grandmother only forbade those things which were the best.

The path twisted, and the sunlight slanted through the branches, and danced in lazy patches on the carpet of fallen leaves. The floor of the forest almost moved like the surface of the big slow river. The wind in the branches sounded almost like the flowing water. Everything about the forest was wonderful. The path twisted.

Vale stopped. The path had passed into a small clearing where there were no trees and the carpet of brown leaves gave way for a short while to tall prickly grass with the path cutting through the center. But Vale was not looking down at the grass. Vale was looking up.

Up, the trees across the clearing grew very very tall. They towered above. And as she stepped out into the clearing, she looked back and up and saw the trees she had been running beneath were tall as well. Very tall. The trunks were not thick near the ground. They did not look like old and ancient trees. But they were all very tall.

Vale walked across the clearing, and before she followed the path under the

trees again, she stopped and put on her moccasins. The trees should not be so tall in this direction. This was the direction of camp. But she could see the sun, drifting down from its zenith, drifting towards the west, so she knew she was going the right way.

The path twisted, but now Vale cut the corners. The leaves crunched under her moccasins, and danced behind her with the motion of her feet. The air was cooling, and Vale's hair was still damp. It clung to her back and chilled her.

And there was a snap. Vale stopped and looked over her shoulder. There was nothing behind her but the path and the trees. So she began to walk again, and there was another snap, like a small dry branch breaking. She looked back over her shoulder without stopping. She saw nothing, but walked faster. And then on her left, in the corner of her vision, something heavy noiselessly fell from a tree to the ground. She started, and looked, but she saw nothing. She started to run, but then stopped herself, and walked calmly down the path. A dead branch had fallen from the tree. That was all. Branches fall all the time, sometimes even when a person might be walking by.

The floor of the forest was becoming uneven. There were little rises, ridges, slopes, all clothed in fallen leaves and shaded by tall trees. The path worked hard against the angles of the landscape. First pushing up a slope when it ought to go down, then sliding down a slope it ought to have climbed. Vale felt the path was taking her farther west than she wanted. It led both north and west, when she only wanted north, but she kept following it, hoping it would turn. The air was dryer here, and her hair did not feel so damp anymore. The sunlight cut through the canopy in places and provided warmth and light.

Suddenly there was someone walking beside her. Vale gave a yelp of surprise, and would have leaped off the path, except that there was a thicket of blackberry brambles to the right of the her.

He was taller than her, but looked younger. Long pointed ears protruded from his tangle of black hair, and his black eyes focused on her. Vale walked fast, but he was matching her stride step for step.

"You were swimming in my river." he said. "I saw you running barefoot through my forest."

Vale cleared the blackberry patch, and ran off the path for a dozen steps before she glanced back. The stranger was still standing on the path, his head tilted to the side as he stared at her.

"Forgive me," he said, "I did not mean to startle you." And then, extending his hand, "Come, take off you shoes and walk with me. I know where the grass is soft. I know where the breeze is warm."

Vale was frightened, but she was not entirely certain whether or not she wanted to run away. She glanced away in the direction of camp, but when she looked back, he was gone.

Vale waited, but he did not reappear. There was no sound but the wind in the tops of the trees, and no movement but the dancing patches of sunlight. Vale looked behind her, in the direction she had started to run. The shade was thick that way, and she shivered. She looked back at the path. It ran almost in the right direction. Almost. She thought about the stranger. He must be magic, but perhaps he was not so frightening. Maybe he was only a ghost. She returned to the path, and continued in the direction she had been going before.

She walked quickly, but now she stayed on the path and did not cut corners, for her attention was not on her feet, it was on the forest around her. She glanced at every beam of sunlight, at every hint of motion. She listened, and tried to move quietly herself, always wondering if he was still there.

This time he did not take her by surprise. She saw him up ahead, to the left of the path, crouching on a tree branch. He was wearing clothes made of feathers and fur, and she could see that his feet were bare. She stopped when the path brought her close. He was watching her.

"What is your name?" Vale asked.

The stranger laughed softly. "You don't run away." he said. "Are you ready to follow me to the quiet valley?"

"What is your name?" Vale repeated, and then, remembering what grandmother Feather had told her about Magic and Names, she said instead "Who are you?"

"You may call me the Unshod." he whispered, and then in a full voice, "Will you take off your shoes and walk with me?"

Vale looked down at her moccasins, and then back up at the Unshod. His black eyes stared into hers, waiting, waiting.

Vale's mouth formed the first syllable of a question, but she did not finish speaking it, for the Unshod's face twisted, and snarling like a cat he dropped from the tree branch. But he did not land. He vanished, and the leaves did not even stir where his feet should have touched down.

Vale stared wide eyed. The question she was about to have asked was "Why must I take off my shoes?"

Vale shivered, and turned, and ran. The sound of his snarl still echoed in her ears. Not the sound of a Human. Not the sound of a Ghost.

As Vale ran, the trees thinned a little, and the carpet of fallen leaves was broken by patches of bare earth and exposed rocks, and she could have almost believed that she was nearing camp, except that the ground was sloping gently downward all around her.

There was much sunlight through the trees, and because it was bright, Vale dared to slow to a walk and look about her. To her left was a valley, and to her right was a ravine, and the path was leading her down the ridge of a little spit of land which separated them, sloping downwards directly towards the declining

sun. If she wanted to go north, and indeed by now she knew that she must not only go north, but back a bit east as well, she would have to leave the path entirely, and climb down the rocky hillside into the ravine, and up the other side. She left the path and looked over the ravine. On the downward slope there were still many trees but they were widely spaced, scattered amongst the receding ledges of rock. Everywhere in the sunlight grew wild roses. The flowers had already wilted, but there were specks of color wherever the red rose hips grew on the stems.

Vale backtracked a little, looking for the best way down into the ravine, and then left the path, and began to pick her way among the wild roses.

She reached the first ridge of rock, and she sat down and dangled her legs down over the edge, and tried to judge if the distance was short enough for her to jump. There were wild roses growing right up against the base of the rocks, but they looked small, and their little thorns would not be enough to penetrate her moccasins.

A noise like a rising murmur of laughter grew from behind her, and Vale turned her head sharply and listened. The noise grew to a creaking roar like a fire, and then grew more, to be like a stampede of horses. The trees were trembling, and the rock beneath her shuddered. The stampede grew, and became what it really was, a hurricane wind. Vale could see it advancing through the trees like an invisible wall of force, carrying spirals of leaves with it, lifting and breaking branches, making the whole forest bend under its fury.

The wall of wind hit her, and tore at her hair, and tore at her dress, and she thought she would be pushed over the ledge. She gripped the only thing in reach, the brambles of wild rose, and though the thorns cut her, she held tight.

And suddenly it was gone, and everything was as still and quiet as it had been before. Perhaps even more so. Vale breathed deeply. There were leaves everywhere, scattered on the ground and snagged in the wild roses. She opened her hands gently, and carefully removed the bits of thorn. Her hands bled a little, but not badly.

When her mind strayed from the pain in her hands, Vale realized that something felt wrong. She looked down over the ledge, her eyes first focusing on the thorns below, but then on her feet. Her moccasins were gone. The wind had ripped them off and carried them away. She frantically searched the ground below with her eyes, but could see nothing.

Vale looked down at the thorns below her feet, and felt her hands. She did not dare jump down now. She stood up, taking care not to let her palms touch the ground, and carefully picked her way between the wild roses back to the path.

Where could she go? She looked back. If she went all the way back to the river and started again, maybe she could find the right path. But then she would

have to walk past the places where she had encountered the Unshod. There was no going back that way. She looked down the path into the valley. It was the wrong direction, but it was the only other path she could take. Barefoot, she had no choice but to follow the path.

By the time Vale reached the bottom of the valley, the sun was behind the hill. The sky was still blue, but now everything was in shadow. The path split. The fork on the left went sharply to the south, the fork on the right continued on just slightly to the north. Vale stayed to the right. The trail twisted a little further. Then again, it split. One diving sharply to the south, the other hinting that it might tend a little to the north. Vale took the right-hand fork.

At the third splitting, Vale stopped. She looked over her right shoulder. There was no path, but this was the direction she must go. The floor of the forest was level here, and there were no thorns, no brambles. She left the path. The dead leaves felt strange beneath her feet. They crunched ever so lightly, being yellow and brown but still soft.

The leaves gave way to grass. The trees all around were still the same, but there was no more carpet of leaves beneath them. Only green grass. The grass was soft, and a warm breeze was blowing.

"You have decided to come and walk with me." said the Unshod.

Vale did not yelp or run. She was very tired. She just raised her eyes and looked into the face before her.

"You threw away your shoes and came to find me." he said, smiling.

"I lost my shoes." said Vale. "The wind came and—"

The Unshod's face twisted into anger for an instant, but then quickly softened. "You gave them up," he said, "now come and walk with me." He extended his hand to hers.

Vale hesitated, looking at his eyes and then his hand. Finally she opened her own hand and looked at the cuts.

At the sight of her palm, The Unshod twitched his hand away from hers. With a hiss he vanished, leaving her standing alone again.

Vale stood still. What point was there in walking further?

The forest gradually grew darker. The sky was now a deeper blue, like water.

Vale remembered grandmother Feather's oft repeated words. It was almost as if she could hear her voice.

"Never swim in the forest. Never run in the shade of the trees."

Vale began to walk again, forward, in the direction that camp should have been. The direction that home should have been.

"If you find a path, do not follow it. If you lose your shoes you must walk on the paths. Never lose your shoes."

Now Vale understood what this meant. She had always taken the words as an attempt to spoil her fun. An attempt to make her afraid to go into the forest

alone. But she had never understood about the shoes.

There had been more. There had been more words. She had only heard them once, spoken to someone else, and not to her. She did not know until now that she remembered.

"If you find a path, do not follow it." grandmother had said, "For here, a path may be a sign of life, a comfort, a guide, in the deep forest it is different. In the deep forest a path is a thing of fear. When you venture where man does not go, and find a path, who made the path? Who's feet trod it before you? Who or what? Fear the path of the prey, for the predator watches it closely. Fear the path of the predator, for the beasts of the forest tread their own paths silently, and know nothing of the fear of man. There are worse paths too, paths the beasts themselves fear to tread, paths made by souls, or things which feed on souls. A path can lie. A path can seduce. Fear the path you find in the forest. Some paths are not made by feet. Some paths make themselves."

The sky had darkened another shade. "If you lose your shoes you must walk on the paths" Vale said aloud. "Never lose your shoes."

Vale began to run, run blindly. grass, leaves, earth, twigs, all passed underfoot. Darkened tree trunks flew by on either side. Surely she would trip on a root and fall, she thought. Surely the ground would fall away beneath her.

Suddenly she was jerked to a stop. Her wrist had caught on something. No, it had not caught on something, it had been caught. A strong soft hand gripped her wrist tightly.

"Running! Running barefoot! Now you will run with me!" The voice of the Unshod was no longer soft and pleasant, it rasped like the growl of a wild animal. He ran, pulling her with him.

They sailed across the open spaces between the trees, moving faster than Vale thought her legs could carry her. Leaping, over a fallen log, up an embankment, darting between trees and branches, all in shadow and silhouette. They were going up now, Vale almost doubted that they were touching the ground at all, as if the Unshod were leaping from treetop to treetop. The forest flashed and surged around them. Darkness flowed past in waves of inky trees.

And they stopped. Behind them was a hilltop and the sound of rushing water. Before them was the sun setting beyond the forest. The forest stretched out forever, unbroken all the way to the mountains.

Vale panted for breath. The Unshod made no sound.

"This is all yours." He said. gesturing to the panorama before them "I give it to you."

Vale looked back. Behind them was a waterfall, emerging impossibly from the very crest of the hilltop. It fell down softly into a large round lynn, and then flowed past them on one side. In the center of the lynn was a tiny island. Just a wide flat rock protruding from the water. Its surface was covered with something.

The Unshod turned also. "Shoes." he said. "This is where people leave them. They are happier without them."

Vale walked to the edge of the water. The Unshod came and stood beside her. She could see that the surface of the rock was covered with shoes. Shoes of every size and shape. Any shoe that someone might wear into the forest was represented there.

"Shoe is the armor of the foot." Said the Unshod. "Armor is the doubt of the soldier. Doubt of his strength, doubt of his sureness."

Vale looked at the shoes and shivered. They had not been left there by their owners. They had been gathered and put there.

"Shoe is the fear of the step." Continued the Unshod. "Fear to tread, fear to walk. Walk barefoot with me, and walk without fear."

Vale looked into the eyes of the Unshod. The sunset was behind his back, but she could see reflected fire flickering in his eyes. She looked at the shoes on the rock again. It was just a dark mass now.

"You want your shoes back." said the Unshod, in a soft and pleasant tone. "They are there also." He pointed, and her moccasins became visible on top of the pile. "Very well. Swim over and take them back if you wish. But know that if you do, I will be gone when you return."

Vale stared for a long time at the face of the Unshod, until the sun had gone, and the light of the sliver of the distant moon was all that was left.

Vale stepped into the water.

The Unshod exploded with fury, and emitted a howl like a whole pack of wolves singing all at once. The rock with the shoes sank under the water, and when Vale turned back towards him, there was a dead sun burning within each of his eyes, and glittering on his teeth, barred like fangs.

"Unworthy unworthy unworthy!" he whispered manically. "human-animal! I gave you a choice!"

Vale jumped out of the water and ran. Away from the Unshod, away from the waterfall. Down between the trees, through the darkness. She could hear his howls behind her.

Rocks and branches tore at her legs as she ran. She leaped over shapes into emptiness. Pain shot through her feet with each step, but she did not stop.

"Now you can run without fear, can you?" screamed the Unshod. "Now that you have something better to fear than where you put your feet!"

But Vale did not listen to him. She just ran. And when she felt thorns piercing her feet, she did not care. She only wanted to be home.

And suddenly the ground was completely level, and the trees were widely spaced, and there was nothing underfoot but dry grass, and there were no howls on the wind, and although she had been running in the wrong direction, miles and miles away, perhaps worlds away, now here was home right in front of her.

There was the campfire, and there were the wagons. She realized there was no pain in her feet, and no pain in her hands.

Vale stumbled into the firelight, and stood there, blinking and confused. She looked at her hands. There were not even marks on them.

"There you are at last," said grandmother Feather from across the fire. "I sent your brothers out looking for you."

Vale stepped closer to the fire, shivering and looking over her shoulder.

"And I see," added Feather with a note of disapproval, "that you have lost your moccasins."



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