

Uggh...

What's wrong with me....am I still alive?

My head felt so heavy—I'm so woozy.

I couldn't tell where I was. No warmth surrounded me; any signs of life, if they were around, feathered upon dimmed ears. No light greeted me. Were my eyes closed? Was I dreaming?

The prickle of a distressed breath traced up my spine and I shivered. Dreams aren't usually that vivid, right? Survival instinct kicked in, as I drew in a deep, albeit staggering, intake of stale air. And then exhaled.

Again.

One more time. Really deep breath!

Okay—I was definitely not dreaming. This was real—whatever “it” was, and I was alive.

Great. Fantastic.

My hands instinctively fumbled towards my stomach, to check there first for any injuries, then patted over each arm, my face, my legs—wait. Regardless of pain, I forced my eyes to open. I could feel the panic immediately pour over each nerve once I realized I was cramped inside some sort of sack or net. And it wasn't made from some thin material; if it were daylight out, all that could possibly give it away would've been the warm tint barely visible amongst hue-less darkness. Whomever made this was highly skilled and knew it. The fabric may as well had “arrogance” written all over it In marker.

Heck, maybe it did and the joke was on me because I wouldn't have been able to notice it, anyway!

Wait, why am I indirectly admiring this person's handiwork? I need to get out of here!!

I tried to stand—which of COURSE was a TERRIBLE idea. I wound up wobbling back into the coiled position I had woken up in! And since that didn't work, naturally I did what any trapped person would do.

So, I punched it! Maybe my large man-fist would be enough to loosen the threads and rip this thing apart!

..It would seem my enthusiasm far outweighed my believed in abilities, as that little stunt just resulted in me blowing on my poor raw knuckles. Swiftly burning low on ideas here, I unwittingly screamed while flailing about in the net. I weighed a good 160 pounds! It has to be enough force to shake this thing free!

Ok, so maybe 160 pounds was considered very light, but I wanted to believe!!!!

As you may have already known, that didn't work. Tired, getting hungry, and frustrated, I grasped at the wiry fibers and thrust my head against them. What was I going to do? I was nearly ready to give up—but I hated to lose. But maybe I should. There was no one for me to return home to, no animal

sorrowfully wondering why I wasn't there to feed them yet...

All my thrashing around just made the atmosphere much stuffier. It was far too uncomfortable. Of course, it didn't help all the junk in my pockets were poking through into my thighs. Why did I even carry a lighter anyway? I wasn't a smoker.

...  
.....

DUH! Why didn't think of trying that before!? The confined space was almost too restricting, but I managed to slip my noddle arm into my pocket and yank out my lighter. I was about to attempt something very stupid, but "stupid" is basically the anthem and theme song of my life, so why not?

After a bit of scrambling around as to not get burned, I finally managed to roll out of that accursed sack and luckily flopped back first onto some bramble. I mean...at least it was *somewhat* soft. It could have been concrete.

You know what, concrete would have been more of a welcome splat than this!

Eventually, I pulled myself from the vines' claws and maneuvered away from the burning remnants of my former captivity. Heaving fearful gasps, while greedily gulping down sweetened oxygen, I scanned the area. It was someplace out in nature. There were no visible mountains in the distance, so perhaps I was atop one?

I clamped down on the most recent memory relating to how I got here. I had gotten drunk with some friends at home, they went for an off-road joyride and then... and then...?... Cue me waking up in that sack? Did one of them put me in there?

Aligned with my thoughts, my vision shifted along the ground and then upto the tree that once held me. I'm no hunter, or nature boy, but I've seen enough cartoons to see a makeshift trap when I see one. And a bright orange one, at that; how tacky. At least the flames were far too weak to reach the branches, but who in the world would try to trap a person? There was no way a bear would fit in something like that.

"...Huh..." I scoffed, intrigued.

Well, as one life-threatening adventure met its close, a new issue had arisen. I would need to arm myself, just in case. Madly waving a lighter around didn't seem like the best method to adhere to out in the wild. I pushed myself to a wobbly stand, and surveyed the clearing for anything of use. Didn't hunter folk used to put together tools made from rocks and twigs way back in the day?

Yeah! And they would make all sorts of things, knives, sharp pointy rocks, spears...ooh I could make an axe!! How cool would that be? All the ladies would dig that kind of rugged manliness, wouldn't they? Not that any pretty lady would randomly happen to find me here, by any chance but it doesn't matter!

An axe, it'll be!

Vaguely recalling what an old school axe looked like when made from nature, I rustled up a few sharp rocks, non-barbed vines, and a thick bundle of sticks. Yet, I don't remember axes having such long handles with a spaded tip. Actually, what I made looked more like an arrow. No problem! That was a

good weapon, right? Now, how did arrows work, again? Oh yeah, they needed a bow...something of which I had no idea how to even fail in making, let alone succeeding with. Ehh, I could just stab with it instead. So, to test it out, I did and jabbed it into an old tree's bark. With grit teeth, I winced at the sight of my creation snapping in half and becoming crowned with splintering pieces.

It seemed more like a dagger than anything else, now—a terribly scant parody of one. Just to make myself feel better, I snatched up another sharp stone and etched “Dagger” as carefully as I could into the wooded hilt.

Yeah...this wasn't so bad.

In any case, I should hurry to get out of here before it got too dark...only there were no paths no anywhere that I could make out. To add more insult to my mishaps, my perfect navigation skills led me climbing over chilled rocks, narrowly missing several more placed traps and best of all, ending up exactly where I first found myself...

The creep of night already was fast approaching. At worst, I would need to make camp until morning. Making a small fire was something even I could accomplish with some effort. After doing that, I figured, what the heck—why not attempt to make a trap like the one that got me? Might do some good.

I tried my best.

Exhausted, my body tugged me down into an uneven slouch on the ground. There wasn't much around for me to make anything that resembled a tent out of, so I placed the largest leaf around—that was the size of my palm—and let it rest atop my stomach as if it would help drink in the flames' warmth from a distance. Perhaps that would aid in soothing my hunger a tiny bit. I didn't want to risk chowing down on some pine cones and acorns only to hack them back up and feel even worse, so I didn't bother eating.

Gradually, my lids lowered; the insanity of the day's events churned in disproportionate shapes and squiggles now that I didn't have to see its mayhem before me.

Did I drift off? I don't remember. The shuffle of rustling jostled me; I only had time to glance towards the open flame before the form of another rounded my eyes in shock.

“AHHHH!!!” I shrieked—shouted—from the intrusion. The figure made no move, and simply glowered at me. The lick of the fire teased around the newcomer, haloing them in yellow-reddish speckles that almost rivaled confetti. Through rapid blinks and labored pants, my brain somehow worked on its own to decipher what I was witnessing.

It was a person. A woman.

From the pit of the flames' luminance, it shed clarity on the dark camo pants that clung to her shapely muscular legs. Wide hips, a midriff that exposed taut abs led my stolen gaze about her presence. Her face, a delectable visage of dark honey, was accented by irises of green and a full head of crimped hair that adorned her like royalty.

“...Beautiful...” I uttered, mindlessly, in a hushed whisper. Once sense returned to me, I slapped a hand over my mouth, hoping she hadn't heard me. I'm pretty sure the first thing to say to a lady, namely one

this gorgeous, would be hello first!

“H-Hi?” I mustered, waving dumbly. The woman's frown did not lessen. In fact, it loudened.

“What are you doing here?” she countered curtly; the terseness of her tone was an absolute contrast to the melodic timbre of her voice. I guess I didn't answer for some time, because she took a stance and pointed something at me. It looked blocky and square-like. Was that a book? Why would she point a book at me? Did she want me to read it? Did it contain survival info? Was it a spell book? Was she a mage? Cool. Actually, it looked more like a sketchbook. Was she a researcher or landscape artist? Come to think of it, she had what looked like a very long—and very wide-- artist's tube strapped to her back.

Oh right, she asked me something!

“Um... I wound up here...?”

“...”

“My friends! My friends and I were out for a ride and well...when I woke up I was stuck here. Wait wait! That sounds really vague. I'm sorry! Uh...we were all drunk and--”

“No....” she trailed off.

No? No what? Was I telling my own story wrong? Before I could inquire what she meant, her expression malformed into one of great concern with a flicker of fear. She raised the book, balancing its base on a palm while her other hand appeared ready to open it.

“...You've already found too much. This area is private. I need to get rid of you.”

I blinked. For some amazing reason, I chose to lighten the confusing mood with humor, “Huh? Come on, now. I'm sorry you may be a starving artist, but that's no reason for you to kill me! Ha...haha I mean... I wouldn't mind if you stepped on me, instead...!”

Aaand just like that, the “sketchbook?” was tossed aside; in her hands, and held quite skillfully, was a shiny gun. And not just any gun!

“Whoa! T-that's...a...”

“A magnum. If you so much as sneeze the wrong way, one shot is all it'll take. Unluckily for you, I've brought some pepper with me.”

“W H O A!” I leapt to my feet with my hands raised, “Don't waste your ammo on me! I'm sorry I set off your traps and burned one, okay!?”

She flinched, as if allowing the insipid outburst to cognitively simmer. A moment later, she spoke, “You set one on fire?”

“It was the only way I could get out!”

“Stupid!! Those traps were state of the art handmade down to the finest detail and you simply burned them? They're bright orange! How could you walk into one?!”

“I told you my friends and I were drunk!! I don't know how I managed to end up in one, but burning my way out was all I could do! And I know I already sound crazy right now, but WHY were they orange?! What were you hoping to catch!?”

“A Sasquatch Cousin! Everyone knows orange is the only color they can't see! It's a blatant beacon of 'Hmm this seems out of place' for a person!”

Somehow, I found the strength, and abandoned my fears, to argue, “What!? You're calling ME stupid when you're out here trying to catch a mythical creature like Bigfoot!?”

“...!”

“And anyone who knows about Bigfoot also know that Sasquatch Cousins CAN see EVERY color! Vividly! Like an eagle can! You ought to know that 'can't see orange' thing was just an old rumor to expose hunters!”

“And yet, you still wound up in one.”

“I wasn't in my best state of mind!!!!”

“Regardless! You're a witness and I can't allow you to leave. The public doesn't need to know what I'm doing. Finding this creature will keep them safe,” She circled around the campfire, with the gun raised, until she was positioned behind me.

And I let her do it, for no good reason.

“They don't need to be put into a panic from hearing about it from a random who got himself drunk and fell into a bright orange trap!”

“I'll tell you what! How about we put all this behind us, okay? If you let me live, you'll...you'll get to keep all your ammo!”

“...” She inched closer to my back.

“You'll--! You'll be a lot safer!!”

“...” I yelped from metal so cold, it may as well have carved my bare skin with its frigid bite, rather than through my shirt.

“I'll!! I'll buy you anything you want!!! I'll take you out to dinner! Several dinners! And dessert! Dancing! Travel across the country! Anything!! Just please don't do this!”

“...What...” I swear I could hear the quirked brow in her plummeting disbelief.

“I'll buy you anything! I have money!! Not...not with me right now. It's at my house but, I have no one but myself to spend money on, but I'll gladly spend it all on you!!!”

“... .. Pfft...”

Was that a chortle? Was she laughing?

There may be hope for me, yet!

“Please!”

The press of the gun faded; the ground crunched as she presumably took a few steps backwards, “Bwahahaa! You're stupid, you know that!”

“I'll take it!”

“Really stupid.”

I still had my back to her, but I knew the hint of a smile when I heard one. I may as well test my luck, and risk it all, “Does...does that mean there's a chance of you stepping on me in my future?”

“WHAT!? Hahaha Little man, I don't even know your name.”

“Is...could I... can I turn around now?”

“...You may.”

Feebly, I stuck out my hand in friendly gesture, “I'm Joey. Nice to meet you, miss...?”

Her nose wrinkled and she gave the cutest snort, but shook my hand anyway, “Just call me Lightning Hawk. I'll give you my real name if I think you'll be worth it.”

Haha...she was funny. I liked that. The two of us fell into an easy and comfortable laughter. At least, I hoped that's what seemed to be happening. I wouldn't want to wake up as a ghost and realize I was dreaming the whole thing.

Do ghosts even dream?

I suppose now wasn't the time for such thoughts; the entire ground began to tremble—and I don't mean earthquake-like. It was more along the lines of “this isn't normal” and “imminent doom” type of trembling.

Both of us prepared ourselves for whatever might happen. She appeared collected and ready to throw-down, while I struggled keeping calm with my heart and stomach having a ball doing flip-flops.

Like something out of a movie, one of the taller trees started to uproot itself from the flora around it. The higher it rose, the more either sides of it branched off until it split into...  
...two arms?!

And its base tapered into two legs?! Was this tree some kind of monster?! Delirious, I shouted the first thing that came to mind, “BUT WE HAVEN'T CHOPPED DOWN ANY PINE TREES!!”

“Hey!” Lightning Hawk called over my nonsense, “how good are you with a bow??!”

“NOT VERY!”

“Here!” She pulled the artist's tube from around her and threw it at me, “Use this!”

I almost countered with a foolish retort before my lizard brain remembered she hid an inordinately large gun in a fake sketchbook and tore open the tube.

Somehow, I was not surprised to see a nice hefty sniper rifle in there. With frantically unsteady fingers, I grasped the weapon and ran with it until I was at a favorable enough distance to target the giant tree monster. Despite picking off a tree with bullets making no sense whatsoever to me, I held the rifle up and peered through the scope. That helped with absolutely nothing, as my hands quivered far too much to focus.

“I don't have any Diazepam! O-or Pentazemin!!!!” I floundered, speaking my haphazard thoughts aloud.

“THIS ISN'T SOME VIDEO GAME!” she shouted back, aiming as best as she could against a colossus with no viable targets.

“OH YEAH!?” I had lost it, now, “SAYS THE ONE WHO CALLS HERSELF 'LIGHTNING HAWK'.”

“I DON'T HEAR YOU FIRING!”

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

...

...

One minute we were fighting for our lives...

...and the next...

...it all went by in a blur—like still images.

The tree nearly cornered us.

I sobbed while shooting.

The tree launched its limbs forward towards me.

Lighting Hawk jumped in front of me.

We both backed away.

And then...

The world flipped upside down.

As ironic karma would have it, she and I triggered a trap I had set earlier, trying to mimic her hunter style just in case any predator tried to sneak into camp.

Looks like the joke's on me, this round.

Over my wailing, I barely register the tree creature tying the net with us in it around where its neck would be, if it were human, and trudging away.

END

Neekiko.