

THE CLEARING

The dead leaves and dried fir needles crackled like brittle bones beneath Vera's sneakers, stinging nettles clawing at her ankles as she trudged through the darkening forest.

"How far can that clearing be?" she mumbled through clenched teeth, her voice barely escaping her lips.

Should she fail to reach the sacred clearing and bathe in the midnight moonlight, she would be condemned to return to her pathetic existence—back to her soul-crushing job and her cold, empty bed. This desperate pilgrimage was her last-ditch effort at reinvention. Dating apps had left her hollow, weight loss regimens had betrayed her, and her job prospects were beyond laughable. She had resorted to magic—or whatever occult intervention awaited her in these cursed woods. If this ultimate endeavor failed, at least her mother couldn't accuse her of not exploring every possible avenue to salvage her miserable life.

The ritual was simple enough: bathe in the moonlight at the heart of the clearing, and your life would reset itself. Those who had survived the treacherous path through the Pyrenees woods—and hadn't gotten lost or perished on their way back—described it as a moment of profound transformation, a rebirth that rewrote the very essence of their existence. The true challenge, however, was in finding these sacred grounds.

Alas, not a single guide or local had been willing to point her in the right direction. Their eyes had darkened at her questions, their faces growing pale as they hurriedly made signs of the cross.

Vera scrutinized the weathered French map for what felt like the millionth time, turning the flimsy paper this way and that as she struggled to pinpoint her location.

"I should have passed La Main de Dieu by now," she grumbled, scanning the woods for the legendary five-branched sentinel tree that supposedly guarded the clearing.

The recent *tempête* had ravaged the forest, obliterating the marked path until it was nothing but a shattered memory. Thick tangles of undergrowth, fallen trees, and splintered branches created a labyrinth of shadows, confusing even the most experienced hiker's sense of direction.

"Which way now?"

Vera glanced down at her compass, seeking comfort in its steadfast guidance. To her horror, her once-reliable instrument had betrayed her—its needle twitched and trembled like a dying insect, possessed by unseen magnetic forces.

"*Merde!*" The curse escaped her lips in a frightened whisper.

She craned her neck toward the gaps in the verdant canopy above, searching for the sun to establish East from West. But the fiery orb had abandoned her to the mercy of the forest. Thunderous clouds had invaded the sky, drawing a leaden curtain between the woods and the heavens, suffocating what little light remained.

"Nature, *un*; technology, *zéro*," Vera scoffed, suddenly regretting her teenage choice of influencer retreat over Girl Scouts survival camp.

"*Ne panique pas*," she commanded herself, forcing her breathing into measured boxes—four counts in, hold for four, four counts out. "Think," she urged. "How do you find north without a compass?"

She should know this. She'd binged enough survival shows, hadn't she? With arms outstretched like a human sundial, Vera searched for her shadow among the dying trees and rotting ground. Though this effort proved futile, her yoga-esque pose triggered a

memory from her college ecology class: moss favored the northern side of trees. Finally, her crushing student loan debt justified itself. It wasn't much, but Vera clung to this fragment of knowledge like a drowning woman to driftwood.

She followed the mossy trail until a crude carving caught her eye—an arrow, beckoning her deeper into the darkness. Another followed, then another, as if leading her through some forgotten realm. She stumbled forward, her heavy legs tracking the path of moss and mysterious markings, until at last, she stood before a colossal oak. Its trunk was blackened by lightning, its leafless branches reaching toward the dusky sky like the gnarled fingers of a corpse. Just beyond, a clearing shimmered with the first kiss of moonlight.

Shuddering with relief, Vera stumbled into the twilight and collapsed at its center.

"*Allez*, do your thing," she shouted at the ascending moon before exhaustion claimed her.

When Vera stirred from her brief slumber, the lunar orb loomed above like a menacing eye. An oppressive stillness weighted the air, thick with the stench of decay. The wind slashed through the foliage, carrying whispers that sounded disturbingly like arguing voices.

Shadows writhed beneath the pallid moonlight, weaving demented tapestries across the forest floor. Spectral silhouettes emerged from the darkness, encircling her as the moon's cold light drenched her skin. Then, her wristwatch beeped midnight, and the grey figures descended on her all at once, their faces gaunt and twisted, their blank eyes gleaming with predatory hunger. They slammed into her with the force of icy lightning, burrowing beneath her skin as if trying to evict her from her own flesh. Her naive assumption that these would be benevolent spirits, wise guides to a better life, shattered like glass.

Thrashing wildly, her arms slicing through the frigid air, Vera fought against the swarm of phantoms. Her fists cleaved through the malevolent mist as the horrifying truth of her situation dawned.

"Elle est à moi!" and "No, she's mine!" the spirits contested, their presence persistent as they darted around her throat like a noose of fog.

Her attempts to flee the clearing were thwarted by an invisible barrier that hurled her back into the whirlpool of clamoring ghosts.

"It's my turn," one spectral voice declared.

"I deserve her more," another countered.

The commotion grew deafening as souls argued and jostled, vying for her corporeal shell. As the tumult escalated, Vera's heart plummeted. She had come here to reshape her existence, not to surrender it to some disembodied spirit searching for a vessel.

Dread coursed through her veins, testing the limits of her fortitude. Then she felt it—a peculiar tug, a detachment like the chill of morning air as she'd fled countless lovers' beds on her ritual walks of shame. Phantom tendrils snaked through her veins, constricting around her essence until it erupted from her flesh like a champagne cork at New Year's.

A piercing scream tore from Vera's lips as an invisible force ripped her apart, evicting her from her own body. Casting her soul into the hovering spectral congregation. The chaos died to sepulchral silence as her physical face gazed upward, staring at her ethereal self with an unsettling smile. Though Vera felt physically weightless for the first

time in her adult life, this wasn't what she'd wanted. This wasn't what she'd had in mind at all.

"Hey, it's my body! You can't just take over my life like that!" she shouted, her voice thick with defiance as she struggled to reach her physical form. She kicked at the air, thrusting her hands forward as if swimming against a formidable tide, but her spectral form refused to obey her commands the way her physical body once had.

"La vitesse et la force take time to master," a lingering phantom mocked.

An icy dread crept over Vera. "How long? Can you teach me? Show me now?" she pleaded, her voice a desperate whisper.

The hazy figure, shrouded in murky grey, shrugged its ethereal shoulders. "I don't help the competition. The next traveler's mine," it declared, vanishing into the moonlit mist with indifference.

Days stretched into weeks and weeks stretched into months as Vera plotted her return. She bided her time, anticipating the arrival of the next unsuspecting wanderers drawn to the cursed clearing in search of a new life.

The dead leaves and dry needles danced beneath her ghostly feet now, the stinging nettles mere whispers against her spectral form as she glided across the forest floor.

"Quand arrive le prochain voyageur? When will they come?" she bellowed, her words bouncing off the ancient trees like a haunting lament. She needed to lure a hiker to the clearing and seize their body to escape these macabre woods. Their identity, gender, age, or vocation didn't matter. Any pitiable soul would suffice as long as they possessed a tangible form.

Really, any loser would do.