

In the Long Ago by Gabriel Hughes 1

In the long long ago, in a time before time...

Life was short for man. Sickness, cold, hunger, death, despair, and fear were constant companions. As with all, our hero was destined to perish, cold and hungry as he was. But fate had other plans for him. Fate...and other forces.

As our hero searched for food to fill the groaning void in his belly he spoke aloud to the wood that surrounded him.

“Why is it I must struggle so? If it is only in death that I will find rest, then let it come,” he grumbled.

Perhaps if he had not grumbled so, he might have heard the Beast approach.

The struggle was short, and our hero was gravely wounded. He bled his life's blood upon the hard ground. His wish for death forgotten, he whimpered,

“Oh help, please help, for I will surely die.” And so he passed into a fitful rest.

But this was not the end of our hero's tale, for both he and the Beast still lived.

He awoke to the sound of flowing water and the touch of gentle hands.

“Shh, be at peace,” came a female voice “You are wounded, near death's door in fact. But it was I who found you.”

Our hero did not know what to make of this kindness, or the healer who visited it upon him.

But over time his wounds knitted themselves. She taught him how to bandage himself, to clean his wounds, and where he might find herbs and barks that might ease his pain. All her arts she taught him, leaving it to him to do once he had mastered each method.

When at last his wounds were healed and her arts were known she smiled, lifted him onto his feet, and set him on his way. But once he left Her presence the reality of the wood surrounded him once more. He had not left the area where he was attacked by the Beast, and it still roamed the wood. And our hero was frightened.

But some comfort was gained from the knowledge that were he so wounded again, he would be able to heal himself. With that in his mind, he passed into a less fitful rest.

His dreams were haunted by the feeling of helplessness at the immense paws of the Beast. In his fear he left the wood and traveled into the stony plains. After much time traveling he heard a strange noise, one he had never heard before, the chink of metal on stone. Following the noise, he came upon a builder at his work, constructing a wall. Our hero watched the

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builder as the builder considered his construction.

Eventually the builder's eyes lifted from his work and he spied our hero and called out to him.

“Come, traveler, be in the shade of my works, drink my water, speak with me, and perhaps we can both learn something.” And our hero joined him.

Together they considered the wall. The builder explained to him its construction, our hero explained flaws he saw, and together they corrected them. They spent much time dwelling within its safety, discussing how it might be improved by a house just here, a pen just there, and perhaps a family to dwell within.

But the day came where the builder could stay no longer. He bid our hero farewell, telling him he would go out and create more as they discussed.

Our hero watched as he left, standing upon the safe walls he had helped construct, and he felt lonely and empty, his belly reminding him of its need. He would need to find food, and the Beast still wandered the wood. But for now, behind his high walls, he could rest.

He awoke to the needs of the flesh: Hunger, thirst, and others. With them in mind he set off, carefully, in the direction of the wood. Afraid of what dwelt within, he stood at the edge of the wood and simply looked in forlornly. It was like this he was found by a young and comely woman, weighed down by the fruits of harvest.

“Do you hunger, traveler?” she said “Come with me and I will see you sated.”

And he followed, as anyone would. After a walk full of laughter and talk they came upon a small hut half in and half out of the wood, built of wood in wood, and bone on stone. She took our hero inside and set down her burden. Our hero cast his gaze around the hut, seeing both the fruits of harvest, as well as those of the hunt. The woman watched him as he took in his surroundings. His eyes fell upon many things: spear, bow, axe.

And each of these he asked of her, for they were wondrous and new to his eyes, but to each she replied they were not hers to give. But she would give him a gift, she promised, for it was his right as a guest. She showed him to a small mound of moist earth and breaking open fruit she placed its seed deep within, and showed him how to make it fertile.

Too quickly she was ushering him away, simply smiling and shaking her head at his pleas to stay. In his hands she placed all the fruits of her labor, and bade him go forth and be sated.

And our hero found as he returned to his home a woman taking shelter there from the sun. They shared the bounty and made the area surrounding full of the beauty of growing life. For a little while at least he was able to put the fear of the Beast to rest. There was harvest

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enough to share, and through hard work and with joy he shared the treasures of food and drink with those he loved.

Before long the garden of their union bore fruit, as numerous and wonderful as their garden of earth. But as the beauty of new life was being brought into the world, so too was the fire of his mate's life fading from it. She grew weak, grey, and cold. And our hero despaired.

He practiced all the healing arts he had been taught, to no avail. He built a fire in the center of their home constructed in ways he had learned, to no avail. He found the most perfect and healthful plants and fed them to her, to no avail.

And then a visitor came.

She sat down by where his mate lay and took her hand. She smiled, kindly. She whispered in his mate's ear, brushed her hair back from her face. And our hero was afraid.

He demanded she tell him who she was.

She was silent.

He demanded she tell him what she wanted.

She was still.

He demanded her purpose.

She sang.

And he wept.

Together they prepared his mate. They bathed her, wrapped her in warm cloth, and prepared her for travel. Their children bid her farewell. The visitor took his mate's hand, brought her to her feet, and together they walked and were gone.

And he, with the weight of the world on his shoulders was unable to find rest.

Our hero fell into a deep lethargy.

What could he have done differently? Perhaps he had not remembered the healer's teachings well enough, perhaps the skills the builder had taught him were incomplete, perhaps he had not nurtured the plants he was given rightly. Perhaps he was being punished.

His children began to take up the tasks he had performed. They bound each other's wounds, they repaired their home, they grew and gathered food. And our hero was ashamed.

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He began to believe his children no longer needed him, that he was a burden to them, best laid aside. And he thought of the wood, and of the Beast. He began to watch it from afar, remembering its dangers, and he longed for the simplicity of its release.

And, he believed, the wood watched back.

It whispered to him.

It told him he was a failure, that he could never escape the cycle, that he could never be anything other than prey.

And he was overcome by the darkness surrounding, and within him.

But in the darkness our hero saw movement, here and there, like smoke. It came closer, moving along the ground, coalescing finally into the shape of a man, cloaked, walking toward our hero's home.

Cautiously our hero climbed down from his wall, remembering vividly his last visitor, wondering if his own end was near. But the man did not speak, did not whisper or sing. He came to a stop in front of our hero and looked at him.

And our hero looked back at this man he hoped was his destruction. They stayed like this for some time, each looking at the other.

But our hero was brash and driven by his needs. He had eaten and drank much in his depression, and was overcome with the need to relieve himself. So without a backward glance he walked into the darkness to do just that. He was only gone for a few moments, but when he turned back toward his home it had been transformed.

He had not even realized it, but since his mate's death it had become a place of darkness and cold, as though it had died too. The fires had burned low, there was no laughter, no song. But now it was bright, and the chattering of his children came from inside. He looked for the cloaked man, but did not see him.

And so he too went inside. Sitting by the central fire was the man, one of our hero's children on his knee. He was listening to them tell him all of the amazing things they had seen, as only a child can see them. To each of them he had a smile to give, a patient ear to listen, perhaps some hidden treasure to share with them when no one else was looking.

And the children, having lost one parent to death, and another to despair, were excited to have someone to talk to. And our hero became angry.

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How dare this man come take his children from him. He had failed to save his mate he knew, he had even failed to care for his family and home as he should, but they were his. This man had no right to them. He clenched his fist, blaming this man for all the hardships that he had endured. He wanted to cause the man harm, just as the Beast had harmed him.

He took a step forward, and looked up at the man. The man was looking back. As were his children.

His youngest approached our hero, took his hand which had been clenched in anger, and looked up at him with a smile. The child led him to the fire and sat him across from the cloaked man, who looked at our hero kindly. And together they listened to the children's stories until one by one each child fell into a happy and contented rest.

For a long time the man sat across from our hero, a child resting upon each of them. And then he spoke, for the first time.

“This is pride, you know. This self-hatred. You hold yourself responsible for your failures, and pay so little mind to those things in your life which will bring you joy. And they will, as long you don't love sadness more.”

Gently he lifted the child resting upon him and carried her over to her father, and without waking her laid her beside him. And then he was gone.

Our hero rested his hand upon the sleeping child beside him, so like in appearance to his mate, and touched his head to his youngest resting upon him. And for the first time since death claimed his mate, he found rest.

He awoke alone in front of the ashes of the cold fire. He could hear his children playing outside, and he rose to join them. He stood in the entrance to his home and gazed out fondly at his children. He reflected upon his life, his mate that he'd lost, but also on what he'd gained. He had a home safe and secure, a family to care for, food and warmth. And then he spied a man sitting upon a large stone, watching him and his family.

“Another visitor so soon?” He thought, but it was his responsibility to welcome a guest and so he called out to him. And the stranger smiled.

He lifted himself off his stone, took up his spear and rested it upon his shoulder, and approached our hero. And our hero felt as though he had seen this man before, the man's movements seeming familiar to him.

They greeted one another, the stranger complimenting him on his home and family, and our hero thanked him graciously and mentioned he had so recently had another guest within.

The stranger asked about the guest and our hero told him. He told the stranger about his

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sadness at the loss of his mate, his feelings of failure at her death, and the emotions leading up to now. He told him of the anger he felt at the man, and how he had shown him it was anger at himself.

“Then he removed from you what was hindering you?” the stranger asked. Our hero agreed.

They went inside while the children played, and began to clean the living area. Our hero paused upon coming to the place his mate had lain before her death, and the stranger asked about it. Our hero told him of her, how they met here after he had come back from the comely woman’s hut. He told the stranger of their love, and the children it bore. He mentioned the woman who came to take her.

“So they walked together from here?” the stranger said “Then your mate is not alone. If she is with her, she could be in no better hands.” And our hero was comforted.

Together they prepared a midday meal of fruits and vegetables, and the stranger asked from where our hero had gotten them. Our hero spoke of the kind woman of the forest, and the fruits of her garden she had shared with him.

“So she showed you how to live with life, and how to support it so it supports you?”

Our hero agreed, and continued about the wonders of her home, the weapons so strange to him, while peering at the stranger’s spear propped against the wall. The stranger smiled knowingly, and asked about our hero’s home, about its construction. And our hero told him about the builder who helped construct it. He told him of his part in the work with some pride. He showed the stranger the parts he had helped to correct. He wished he could show the builder gratitude for his construction, and the builder’s part in it.

“Did you learn to make good works and the value of them? Then I am sure he is satisfied.”

And our hero smiled. Their discussion was interrupted by a cry from outside. They found our hero’s daughter with a scraped knee, having fallen. Our hero tended to her wound, cleaning and covering it in the way he had learned. And the stranger asked who it was who had taught him these things.

Our hero spoke of the kindly woman who cared for him, how she taught him and let him practice her healing arts. He spoke of the terrible wounds he had received and how he would have died were it not for her care.

“And here you are tending to another’s wounds, doing a healer’s work yourself,” the stranger said. And our hero was proud. “But what, then, gave you these wounds. Surely you did not need such care for a scraped knee.”

And our hero told him of the Beast. Together they sat down with our hero’s children for the

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meal. But his youngest did not come when called.

Our hero asked his other children where his son was, to which his daughter answered that she had seen him wandering in the direction of the wood.

And our hero was afraid as only a parent can be. But he was also afraid as only someone who has brushed with death can be. The stranger stood, picked up his spear, and turned to our hero.

“Now is not the time for fear, now is the time to do what must be done,” he said. And our hero was moved. Together they made their way toward the wood.

As they walked our hero believed for a moment he saw the cloaked man just there, a shape in shadow. But he continued on, his thoughts on his son.

He believed he saw the shape of the visitor, her quiet manner watching him. But he had no fear of her, for his thoughts were on his son.

As they neared the wood, he believed he saw the kindly woman, clothed in green, walking gracefully in the shadow of it.

And he struggled with his fear of the place, but his thoughts returned to his son. He believed he heard distantly the sound of metal on stone. And he thought of the works that had brought him to this place, the works that had given him his mate and family.

And together they entered the wood. He believed he heard the sound of flowing water. And he remembered what he had learned, how it had saved him, and how if his son were hurt it might save him as well.

And then all was silent. The wood seemed to close around them. The stranger crouched low, smelling the air. Our hero walked as quietly as he could, peering around trees with the hope of spying his son.

And distantly they heard the Beast.

Our hero rushed forward but the stranger grabbed his shoulder.

“Take this, my child. Save your son with it and strike low the predator which hunts your kind.”

And the stranger handed our hero his spear, the first weapon he had ever touched.

And again they heard the Beast.

And a child's scream.

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Our hero rushed forward, running toward the noise. He ignored the sting of branches across his face. He jumped obstacles without thought for his own safety. He was without fear. He came to a clearing, the same he had met the Beast so long ago.

He saw his son running toward him, calling to him.

Our hero placed his son behind him just as the Beast crashed into the clearing. He had no time to think, no time to fear. His son was behind him, the Beast before him. He charged. The battle was intense but short.

And in the end, his enemy was lain low. The stranger's spear in his hand was slick. And then he heard the stranger's laugh.

“So, you have conquered, o, wondrous thing called man. You have taken your first steps in making this world yours. You have learned to care for yourself and others. You have learned to build. You have learned to sew and to reap. You have learned of death and of your own need to understand your mind. And now you have learned to overcome those things which haunt your dreams. Look there, at the body of your foe. Take its flesh, eat it, and make its strength your own. Your power will take you to the very corners of this world, and beyond. And remember always it started here, in this place, with an enemy that frightened you, and was overcome because you did not let that fear stop you.”

And our hero looked down upon his fallen foe and felt a different hunger than he had before.

He would take it home, show his children its body, tell them this story and feast.

And one last time he heard the Beast.

And looking up he saw the stranger disappear into the wood.

The end.