

# The Outdoors

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

BRADLEY HU, Grade 11, Johns Creek High School, Alpharetta, GA.

Glancing at my watch, I notice that I have two minutes. For good measure, I quickly check my pack one last time: blanket, matches, water bottle, flashlight. The throwing knife my father had left me before he died sits sleekly in a groove on the left shoulder strap. As I am zipping the pack, I notice a small framed picture of our entire family perched on the drawer; it is the only picture with our father that we have. I throw it in the pack before zipping it completely.

5:00 AM. My mother and sister are asleep. My heart tightens at the possibility of never seeing them again. Sighing, I step up to the touchpad to the right of the sealed doors. I stare at the lens, allowing it to scan my face. Soon, words flash across the screen in red letters: Caleb Louise Dwight, 21. June 27, 12897. 5:00 AM. Do you wish to commence your 24 hours?

“Yes,” I affirm after a moment’s hesitation.

The doors begin to swing inward, but I am not eager to know what is on the other side; I wait until the door is fully ajar before I peer outside. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. The first things they take in are the vines. They are everywhere. They snake their way up the trees, which are the size of skyscrapers. I can barely see the flat, gray sky behind the foliage.

The doors slam shut behind me as my feet crumple the first leaf. Locked, for another 24 hours.

The ground beneath me is parched, and cracks run through the hardened dirt like tributaries. It is a mark of what mankind has done. Back in ancient times, humans stood at the top of the food chain— even eating the plants. As mankind ravaged the Earth, acid rain toxified the soil. Of course, this was devastating to the plants. But Mother Nature got her revenge; no longer able to rely on the nutrient-deprived soil, plants evolved into voracious carnivores.

I lost my father to the plants. Back in 12600, the government had imposed a “solution” to the plant issue.

The Outdoors Act was meant to sustain a balance between human population and food supply. The carnivorous plants had killed off the majority of livestock, so the population was quickly outgrowing the diminishing food supply. The rules are simple: to obtain daily food packages for the household for a period of 10 years, one must leave the safety of confinement for 24 hours. Surviving is not written as one of the requirements. My father never returned.

I make my way over to a tree about 20 feet away. From afar, it seems that the extensive amount of vines winding up the trunk means I can climb to a branch a couple of feet up. Staying above ground level seems sensible anyway. I am at the base of the trunk when I glance down at the patch of moss beneath me. My heart drops out of my chest. The sight is enough to make every ounce of blood in my veins freeze. I scream as I stumble backward, tripping over a vine. Beneath the thin layer of moss, the skull is molded into the Earth, time rendering its features amorphous. Vines entwine the rib cage, weaving intricate patterns through the bone. It is then that I register the smell, which suggests that there are more than just this one. Horror consumes me as I take in the entire circumference of the tree’s base. It is surrounded by the remnants of what used to be living. Some have been stripped away to nothing but a carcass. Others are still fresh with death, skin as pale as alabaster, pupils as wide as the fading full moon.

Nausea overwhelms my senses. My head is spinning. I want to throw up. My mind screams at me to run, but my feet have a mind of their own. Almost as if sensing my paralysis, the vines begin to curl around my feet, quickly making their way up my torso. Snapping out of my trance, I immediately reach for the knife in the side pocket of my pack. The vines have enveloped my chest by the time I dive down, slicing wildly at my feet, where the vines start. Relief washes over me as the tension from the vines releases. It is an ephemeral respite; scrambling to get up, I notice the vines begin their pursuit once more. This time, they seem to grow faster than before, merely annoyed by my attempt to escape. All of the brief moment’s relief is replaced by horror as I watch the vines from all of the trees slither their way toward me.

Before the first one reaches my feet, I have bounded off the ground. Back when animals roamed the Earth,

predators such as lions and jaguars chased down their prey. I am sprinting, like a wounded animal being hunted. My feet take me faster than the Tachyplanes that the government use to deliver daily food packages. The forest flies by in a blur. I am faster than light itself, I think. All sense of direction has abandoned me. Time is meaningless.

I can't tell how long I have been running before the sweet smell fills my senses. It is the first time I have stopped. Gasping for air, I inhale mouthfuls of the sweet smell, and relief floods me once more as I look behind me. The vines are no longer in pursuit. Instead, I am surrounded by hundreds of a single type of flower, undoubtedly the source of the fragrance. They are hauntingly magnificent, and I am filled with an inexplicable urge to stay right here. The petals are a deep crimson, the precise shade of blood. They stack upon each other, spiraling down to a center. I have learned about this plant before. I look closer for the thorns. Sure enough, they are there, confirming my fear. Razor sharp, lining the stems of the flowers. I know about this flower. A Rose, I think it is called. Blocking my nose and mouth, I take off running, but it is too late. I can already feel my head growing light, and I can't run straight. I have just made it out of the rose field when my legs give in. The last thing I remember is an extraordinary blue-and-black winged insect landing on the crook of my arm.

\* \* \*

My eyes open to the touch of a single drop of water on the bridge of my nose. It is soon followed by another, and then another, occurring in shorter intervals. I look past the canopy for the sky. A thick layer of fog shrouds the top, and I can barely make out a flat sheet of grey with inky clouds collaged in the foreground. Wind rips through the tops of the trees, causing leaves to rain down like confetti. And then, with almost no warning, it comes down hard. Rain. I had heard it hammering down upon the roof all the time back at home. The steady drumroll had always calmed me, lulled me to sleep. Here, the beads of water pelt my skin like bullets. Crawling to get up on my feet, I notice my surroundings for the first time. I am encircled by a ring of a single type of green plant. Squinting to see past the fog, I notice that the plant seems to have traps shaped like a mouth, with spikes growing off the top and bottom like teeth. They are swaying alongside the trees, but I can immediately tell that it is not the wind that is causing their movement. They are reach-

ing toward me, yearning to pull me in. I am deciding my next move when a stifled yell emits from behind me, piercing through my thoughts. Fear devours me as I turn toward the sound. I can barely make out his cries for help through the pounding of my heartbeat. From afar, I can almost swear that the man trapped by the plant is.. me. Instinct tells me to leave, but curiosity takes me closer to the thrashing man. One of his arms hangs outside of the trap, desperately signaling me to help. Up close, I realize that the man is not me. He is much older. His hands clasp the teeth of the closed trap as if they are bars on a jail cellar and I can make out his blue eyes and sharp nose from underneath. His features mimic mine.

“Help me sir, I beg you.. pull me out of this damn thing!”

He seems too occupied to recognize me, but I know who he is. All logic evades me. I am unable to comprehend anything, but the only thing I am sure of is that he is my father. Instinctively, I reach for my knife, unsure of my next move. Getting any closer to the plant would get me killed, for sure. There are dozens of gargantuan traps surrounding the one holding my father. Starting to panic, I notice the rain come down harder than before. It drowns out my father's screams and threatens to hammer me into the Earth. Visibility is becoming obsolete but I can make out the waning sliver of the trap through which my father's strength is diminishing. I have no time left. Positioning the knife between my fingers, I aim for the base of the trap, where the plant seems the most fragile. I am ready to let the knife fly when realization dawns upon me. I understand. Humans have never won these games. My father will die slowly and painfully at the hands of Mother Nature. The plants are Mother Nature's assassins, designed to pursue her vengeance. She will have her way. We will all have to play her games. And these games are not meant to be won.

The knife leaves me fingertips and I have turned away before the blade makes contact. It is with a thud I hear above the pounding rain that I know it has found its target. Then, it is the sudden silence that confirms my marked precision. I feel sick to my stomach and tears run down my cheeks, carving paths through my dirt-caked skin. I drop to my knees, but the traps no longer seem to desire my flesh. They are still. They seem surprised at what I have just done. Then, the rain has stopped and the sun is shining. ■