

A Story.

by Amy Parker

Once upon a time there was a lumberjack and his wife who lived in a small, decrepit house at the edge of a great green wood. His name was Griffith, and once a fortnight he could be seen plodding slowly into the village, his muscles red and steaming, with sweat rising like mist off his broad shoulders that heaved under the weight of the wood.

Grunting like a workhorse as he dragged himself into the market square, Griffith would let down his lumber with a thunderous *crash!* that echoed through the village. With his pale-blond hair tied back, Griffith would whittle his lumber down to a more suitable size for each customer, until evening came, and he left with his pockets full of money and his heart full of pride.

His wife was called Bea. She was the daughter of the village tailor and so, she was often seen walking with a long stride, to help stretch her legs after a long day of sewing. Her dark brown hair was always pulled tightly back in a braid to keep it out of her eyes. While Griffith was away, she tended to the old house as best she could. She'd bat away the dirt and dust, or tidy up the mess of strewn cutlery and overturned bedding that was left in Griffith's wake when he left. The only thing separating the house from the endless swaths of dark green trees that surrounded them was a small fence, made of wooden stakes. Every morning, Bea had to tie up or hammer down new posts that had been torn from the ground.

She never saw what did this, but sometimes she'd wake in the dark of night, and swear she could hear something besides the howling wind.

One week, Griffith was later than usual in his return. Bea returned from the market, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The late afternoon sun hung low behind the house, casting a dark, cold shadow that loomed out up to the trees. She peered out into the darkness, searching for any sign of her husband, but none came.

The seconds congealed into minutes, and the minutes crystalised into hours. Bea lit the hearth and placed a candle to the window. Spurred on by panic, she began to pace across the landing, glancing out at the dark forest clearing, until all she could see was the warped orange glow of candlelight against the glass.

'Somethings happened to him and I'm just standing by!' That thought was enough to break Bea's anxious daze and force her out the door. The night air hissed through the trees, making vile, spindly shapes writhe in the darkness. Her lantern gave off a

feeble ring of light that couldn't breach the twisting wooden spires that rose just beyond the front gate.

The darkness of the forest was unbroken and unyielding, the moon was little more than a shard of ice, and the stars were blocked by the canopy. What little light fell to the ground left the dirt, rocks and leaves unmoored. If Bea stepped beyond that little ring of light, she might fall past it straight into the void.

But the thought of Griffith, alone out there facing who knows what, made her heart ache. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him, and if that meant Bea had to do something stupid, then she was willing to play the fool.

Swallowing her fear, Bea let the gnarled old wood curl around her as she crossed that wild threshold. Her footfalls let out only a whispered squelch as she crept through the forest. The air was eerily silent, as though the wind did not dare to give itself away. Bea's heart began to pulse, until all she could hear was a frantic drumming. She kept one eye on the ground, and one straight ahead, but no matter where she glanced, she saw nothing that betrayed the approach. She was utterly alone.

Someone or something was making noise just at the edge of her hearing, a rhythmic, thumping sound, much steadier than Bea's own racing heart. Like the marching of some great army the beat slowly grew louder until Bea thought she was standing right in their path!

Looking desperately around for something to hide behind, she saw a sloping tree that had all but two of its roots free of the earth. She dashed behind the cluttered tangle, and snuffed out the lantern, holding it close as she waited.

The ground began to shake. Bea heard a terrible panting right behind her. But, eventually, the panting ceased, and a glaring silver light fell across the forest floor. As if some great sword of lightning had fallen and pierced the earth. The forest was saturated in silver light, covering the trees in a veil of ash, like a fire had rushed through and razed the entire woodland, leaving the ghosts of trees in its wake.

'Find that brute! I need his heart, only that will pay his debt!'

That voice. Powerful and cold, shot through the air like a thunderclap. Something bright and shining leapt over Bea. She collapsed, curling as tight as she could against the fallen tree, covering her face to stifle a scream.

She waited, in agonising stillness for what felt like the rest of the night. Bea's eyes were saturated with a bloody red light filtering through her fingers, and she braced herself to see the rest of her blood spill across the ashen wood. But at last, the searing light began to dim, as its master drew further and further away through the trees.

Bea's pounding heartbeat began to slow as her fear seeped away. After she was certain the strange creature wasn't coming back, she fumbled in her pockets for another match and lit the lantern.

Bea crept out from her hiding place, taking careful measures to move as quietly as she could. Whoever owned that voice, was hunting Griffith, and if they were likely to find him first, perhaps Bea could follow them.

Where the creatures had been standing, Bea saw three sets of footprints. Two were those of beasts. They were rounder, with indentations pressed closely together. They suggested the idea of a dog's paw to Bea. What puzzled her more was the other footprints.

These weren't quite as bestial, but something forbade Bea from calling them human. They were composed of a long, oval like shape, but several thin, snaking lines wove together to end the footprint in a distinct point.

She had no idea how she was going to rescue Griffith. Whether that creature could be bribed, bartered with, or persuaded otherwise.

But leave? Abandon her love without even trying to save him? No.

That option was a cruelty to them both. So, Bea set off now in the direction of the bizarre footprints, resolving to figure out the next step of her plan when she found it.

This new path took her ever deeper into the wood, and whether Bea had been following this exhausting trail for several minutes or several hours, she couldn't tell.

Suddenly, one of her dragging feet was caught on a rock jutting out from the ground, and she fell to the ground with a muffled *crash!* Sharp stabbing pains shot up her right leg, and she gasped.

She could feel something warm and slimy pool inside her boot. After several minutes of agonising adjustment, the boot came away, and Bea could see a steady ribbon of blood, snaking from a short gash in her ankle.

Panic began to writhe in her stomach. In the dark, as she tried to get her bearings, she could hear that terrible noise again. That low, wild drumming of bestial paws had returned. The sound began to encircle Bea, and that searing silver light shined in front of her.

'There's more than one.' She realised in a moment of horrific clarity. *'They've found me.'*

With a terrible bound, the beasts appeared. Two massive wolves, clad in coats of silver, with eyes of solid gold, stared down at Bea. Both were snarling ferociously, exposing wine-dark gums and yellowing teeth.

The one in front of Bea was completely still. Aside from its continued snarling it did not move. With a shudder, Bea realised it was waiting for its packmate to pounce.

The wolf on her right was crouched low and snarling, but it was moving slowly forward. No matter which wolf she paid attention to, the other would pounce. Even if she could run, there was no doubt they'd be able to catch her.

In that standoff, Bea gripped the axe handle till her fingers ached, she would only get one chance. She turned to stare, headlong at the wolf to her right.

Both wolves charged towards her. Their lolling red tongues slathered in their razor-lined mouths, agape and starving.

In one wild swing, the axes blade collided with the wolf's muzzle, causing its teeth to barely miss Bea's throat. It was knocked to its side, colliding straight into the wolf on the right, causing both to collapse in a writhing pile of heaving fur and splayed legs.

'Heel!' An icy command, spoken in a dreadfully familiar voice rolled across the forest.

Instantly, the wolves ceased flailing and sat at attention. Bea had pulled herself up to her knees, but all this meant was that she could see a glowing silver light slowly approaching.

At first, the creature appeared much as it had before, as a mass of shapeless silver that blanketed the forest. But as it got closer the light dimmed, and she saw, hidden within the searing halo of white, a form that looked both human and tree-like.

Their body was made of a silvery wood that creaked as they moved with an eerie grace. They stood upright on two pockmarked legs, that twisted into feet woven from roots.

Their arms were branches that extended outwards into clawed, twig-like hands, and their face was a slant, greyish mask, with a pit of jagged, wooden teeth for a mouth and two carved holes revealing gleaming amber eyes. All of which was framed by a canopy of thin green leaves, dotted with red flower blossoms.

Bea's heart dropped into her stomach. She tried to jump to her feet. But a flair of pain in her ankle forced her to bow, as if in prayer.

'Please... Please have mercy.'

The wooden creature stared down at Bea with a cold indifference. Then, suddenly:

'What are you? A grasping hand in the darkness? A bloody knife in the back? A heart wooed by false promises. Tell me!'

'I- My name is Bea. I'm looking for my husband, Griffith. She practically tripped over her words.'

The creature began to laugh a guttural, croaking laugh. 'You? You are bound to that Brute?'

Bea looked up, confused. 'What do you mean?'

'He came marching up to my home tree and tried to cut it down!' The wooden being explained. 'What a dull-witted cretin like him planned to do with it is beyond me.'

'I am called Auburn, and I am bound to that tree like you are bound to him. When he struck at its heart, he also struck at mine. Without a heart both myself, and this forest will wither and die.'

As they said this, they reached into a deep ridge in their chest and pulled out a lump of wet mahogany. It cast a dark silhouette against their silvery chest and was covered in a thick red sap.

Bea could see a warm orange glow. But she could also see that light drift slightly, towards a large cut that curved around the side.

A dreadful realisation washed over Bea.

'You need to use Griffith's heart to stay alive, don't you?' She couldn't keep her voice from breaking.

Auburn tilted their head, and blinked. The light in their eyes seemed to soften.

Auburn bent down until they were eye to eye with Bea, and they spoke in a gentle half-whisper.

'You truly love him, don't you?'

'With all my heart.' Bea confessed.

'Then we might both be able to get what we want.' Auburn said.

'If you and this... Griffith, truly love one another, I could use that devotion you share to create a surrogate heart. If you do this for me, I'll let you both go free, and there will be no debt between us.'

'I'm not sure I understand. But I'm willing to try anything if it means no-one has to die.'

Auburn placed a hand over the wound on Bea's ankle. Instantly, a cool, green moss grew over the cut and wrapped itself around her ankle like a bandage. Bea flinched but she didn't feel any pain, and was finally able to stand.

Before she could process what just happened, Auburn had scooped Bea up in one hand, and placed her on the back of one of the wolves.

'Hold tight. We don't have much time.' As Auburn said this, they climbed onto the back of the other wolf. With a piercing howl, the beasts launched themselves deep into the forest.

Bea clung to the wolf's coat for dear life as they galloped across the forest floor. The cold night air stung her face, and she felt like she'd fall off at any moment.

But at last. They skidded to a halt.

All four of them were standing in a wide, circular glade. Small mushrooms and toadstools grew in spiralling rings around a small hill, on top of which stood Auburn's tree.

Its trunk was bent and bowed at strange angles. A rippling red bark stretched from up to its canopy covered in golden leaves, down to writhing, snake-like roots that dug into the earth.

As Bea got closer, she saw streaks of warm orange light pulse through the bark, drifting in one direction. As she followed the trail round the tree, she found Griffith's body, splayed out over a massive gash in the trunk, and covered in sap.

'What? How are you here?' Griffith snapped awake as she approached, glancing frantically between Auburn, the wolves and Bea.

'It's alright, Auburn has a plan to fix this. You just have to trust them.' Bea said.

'Trust them?' Griffith looked taken aback. 'They tried to kill me, why should I trust them?'

'If that tree dies, I die, and take the entire forest with me.' Auburn had walked up to Griffith and held out a hand.

Instantly, the sap liquified and began to spill onto the ground. Griffith stumbled forward onto his knees. Leaving a hollow, open wound cut deep into the bark. His coat hung heavy with blood-like sap.

'That's it! Griffith, give me your coat!' Bea shouted as she dug through her pockets.

'What are you on about?'

Auburn told me that in order for us to both go free, we need to make them a new heart from something that symbolises our true love. Ah! Here!'

She had found her sewing kit.

'If I stitch our coats together, we might be able to save Auburn!'

'Bea, listen to yourself! You sound absolutely mad! How are two coats and the idea of "True Love" going to save a monster like that?' He gestured to Auburn.

'Look, I... I don't know if it's going to work. Bea stammered. 'All I know is that I have to try and fix this.'

Griffith said nothing as Bea set to work sewing. It was an agonisingly slow process, as Bea's tunic was spun from wool, and Griffith's coat was made of a thick brown leather.

Finally, with her hands twitching and raw, Bea presented the oddly shaped mass of leather, sap, and wool to Auburn.

'Auburn. Put your heart in here, and I'll go place in the tree.' Bea gestured to a small divit in the nest of material. Auburn hesitated for a moment. But then gave Bea their old heart.

Bea turned back towards the gash in the tree. But as she turned, Griffith grabbed her arm. Causing the new heart to drop to the floor. Auburn doubled over, and Bea stared at him in shock.

'What are you doing?' She shouted, trying to wriggle away.

'It's a trick!' He yelled back, snatching the spare axe from around Bea's belt. The wolves snarled, but Griffith pointed the axe at them.

'Oh no you don't! I'll kill all of you if that's what it takes!

He lifted the axe high and drove it into Auburn's heart.

Bright orange light flooded into the sky. Bea screamed and pulled herself from Griffith's grasp. With her strength finally spent, she collapsed onto the broken heart.

'I'm so sorry, Auburn please don't die, don't die!' She clutched the heart and began to weep.

'I knew it!' Griffith shouted.

'You've been charmed and enchanted by that... that thing!'

Griffith raised the axe again. But before he could strike. A great wooden claw grabbed Griffith's arm.

'Don't you dare!' It was Auburn. With a great orange light erupting from their chest, they towered over Griffith at their full height. In one swift motion, they threw him across the glen.

He crashed into the forest floor. As he got to his feet, Auburn's wolves ran up to him, snapping their jaws.

'Get out of my forest and never come back!' Auburn yelled, and the two wolves chased Griffith back into the trees.

Something touched Bea lightly on the shoulder, and as she blinked away the dark spots in her eyes, she saw Auburn beaming at her.

'My friend, you did It! You saved my life!'

From that day forward, Bea was never seen in the village again. Some villagers did spy Griffith once, looking like he'd seen a ghost, and wearing two wedding rings on his right hand. Some said that Bea had died in the forest. But others swore that when they went deep into the wood, they saw glimpses a young woman, riding on the back of a great silver wolf.