

Der Schwarzwald

The Black Forest

Huge dark pines and billowing firs tower above us. In the cold winter's hold they have kept their coats of green, which now cast long shadows down upon us. What would it be like, I wonder, to be up amongst their boughs, looking down at the tiny world below? I could lose track of time forever up there...

"Hey, Jean! Are you drifting off again? Pay attention, why dontcha. We're almost there!" Sighing softly, I force my thoughts to stay still for a moment as I glance over at Jane. She's practically bouncing through the snow, impatient smile radiating outwards. It's winter break, which means we actually have some time to ourselves. And for us, 'free time' always means our favorite activity- ice skating.

Sure enough, we soon reach a clearing hidden beneath the trees. I can't help but smile at the beautiful sight. Winter chill has turned the pond into a silvery masterpiece, shining brightly in the sun. Snow lies white and pure around it, broken only by the tracks of some animal trotting by.

Jane and I rush forward, both throwing down our packs and putting on our sharp skates. In seconds, we're out on the ice, twirling and dancing to our hearts' content. Laughter floats in the cool air, and splendid patterns seem to carve themselves into the frozen surface.

Suddenly, from the forest comes a great crashing noise- that of a body bursting through the undergrowth. I'm about to call out to Jane when a familiar bark pierces the air. From amongst the trees barrels the large, furry brown form of our family's dog.

"Clout!" Jane shouts. 'What're you doing here?"

“He probably just followed us here. He hasn’t seen us in so long, you know. He missed us,” I reply, feeling slightly obvious. She doesn’t hear me, though. She’s already distracted by Clout, hugging him tightly and going on about her missing him too. I don’t mind.

Turning around I start skating again, wondering at the way the bright sunlight glints off the silver blades. It’s so beautiful... The slick whisk of my skates and the peace of the forest soon lull me into a blissful calm. The only sounds are Clout’s huffing woofs and Jane’s joyful laughs as they play together in the snow.

I have no idea how long we stayed at the pond. One moment, the sun was high above us. The next, it’s falling down to the west, setting the horizon aflame. Exhaustion slows my movements and weighs down my limbs. Sliding to the edge of the frozen pond where Jane and Clout lie, I take off my skates and free my sore feet. Then, I start shaking my sister’s shoulder.

“Come on, Jane. Get up. If you lie there any longer, you’ll catch a cold. We’ve gotta go.” Jane mumbles something incoherent at me, so I shake her harder. The setting darkness is starting to make me nervous, and we really do have to go. (Funny, that. I’ve lived here all my life, but I still don’t like the Schwarzwald at night).

“Alright, alright, I’m getting up,” Jane groans. “No need to be so pushy.” And despite her complaining, she gets up, dragging Clout up with her. He shakes himself violently, showering us in snow. Shivering, I brush it off, while Jane ignores it. Slowly, we start trudging back home, guided only by our memories and Clout’s nose. He always knows his way home.

The forest is dark, now. Its daylight beauties seem sinister to me- great shadows hide behind the pines, flittering over the snowscape. I find myself jumping at the sound of wind howling through the

branches above. Though I try to hide the flinches (I am eldest, after all. And it's just shadows), Jane notices. She doesn't say anything out loud; just moves a bit closer. Knowing she's right there helps calm me down somewhat, and we continue on as the world gets ever darker.

We are almost home when Clout suddenly freezes, hair on end and ears tight. Without knowing why, Jane and I both stop behind him. I'm instantly tense, looking around for whatever's frightened Clout. I'm about to start walking again (the forest is too deep, too dark, too unknown) when I hear it, right behind us.

Gebell. The cry of a wolf.

I'm moving without thinking, grabbing Jane's hand and pulling her, just trying to get *away*, all of Papa's old faery tales of those great beasts and their prey running through my head, and I can't think- And suddenly, Jane's the one pulling me, guiding me between the tall trees.

"Jean! Jean! Listen to me! You need to calm down! We have to- we have to find somewhere safe, right? If it follows us, we have to..." Her words die off as she glances past there. I follow her gaze, and gasp. There, on the other side of a row of trees, is the wolf. Its lithe, powerful grey body lopes easily along beside us, and its luminous yellow eyes glint in the dim moonlight. It is staring right at us, curiosity clear in its eyes. But there is also a feral intelligence there, so strong it chills me to the bone. The only thing that keeps me from screaming is the look of absolute terror on my sister's face. The thought of her being hurt *snaps* something within me, and the fear in my veins gives way to cool adrenaline.

"We need to get out of its reach," I pant, "but we need to distract it first." Suddenly, I have an idea- a desperate, flawed idea- and I seize it. I grab one of my skates from around my neck and throw it with all my might, right past the wolf and off into the forest. For a split second the wolf pauses, sniffing the air furiously, before it turns and takes off after my skate.

“Come on! It’ll be back. We have to-” I gasp for breath- “get above the ground. It won’t be able to reach us. There! Climb that tree!” By now we’re both exhausted, with sweat rolling down our pale faces. Jane looks like she might faint from fear, but at my words her expression hardens into determination.

“Y-yeah. Let’s go.” Somehow, despite the exhaustion, we manage to make it to the higher boughs of the tree, using our skates’ blades and stray branches for support. Then, Jane freezes.

“Where’s Clout?” *Scheisse*. I look down, and there he is, pawing the base of our shelter and groaning softly. How could I have forgotten about him? I’m about to do something- anything- to get him to safety when a dark shape glides into sight. The wolf is back. Swearing under my breath, I have to physically restrain Jane from jumping down to him.

“Wait, Jane! We can’t go down there. It’d only go after us, too.” Clout’s turned to face the wolf now, teeth bared and a growl growing in his throat. There’s no way he’d be able to beat it, not when he’s just a house pet and the wolf’s a deadly hunter. Desperately, I try to think of something to do to save him, but the fear and panic and guilt is slipping back into control, and I can’t think. Suddenly, something flashes down past me towards the wolf, startling it. It’s one of Jane’s skates.

“Run, Clout! Go find Papa!” she shouts. The wolf looks up at us, snarling. Clout hesitates for a moment, but hears the urgency in her voice at the word ‘Papa’ and runs off, streaking through the shadows. The beast below is about to follow, but Jane’s well-aimed skate nicks its back, bringing its attention to us again. The pure malice and pain in its eyes has me shaking, all my old fears returning. I am terrified, thoughts rushing through my head. *Clout’s gotta be okay and it’s down there waiting and the shadows are everywhere and those yellow eyes are-*

“Jean! Come on come on come on! It can’t reach us up here, we’re safe! Come on, Jean, wake up!... I need you. I’m scared.” And she’s shaking me and I can’t help but think about how this is so similar

to the pond from before, except I was shaking her and she was asleep- and I break from my imaginings and come back to myself. And then Jane's in my arms and I'm in her arms and she's crying and the wolf is still there but that's okay, because we're alive, we're *safe*.

I don't know how long we're trapped up in that tree. It might have been minutes, or it might have been hours. The wolf had long ago slunk off into the trees, tired of waiting for its elusive prey.

At long last, the first light of day breaks upon the world, revealing a sight so utterly beautiful that it takes my breath away, and all my worries fade to nothing, no more real than the old faery tales that once haunted my youth. The sun bursts over the snow-coated horizon, making the wintery forest glimmer like silver. The Schwarzwald, so unlike the terrible black forest of the night, has become a wondrous place of peace. As a familiar bark cuts through the quiet air, mixed with the strong timbre of Papa's voice, I lean back into my sister's grasp and let a contented smile cross my face.

(“We’re up here!”)