The Secret World of Terijian

A magical story about the secrets in our own backyards

CrimethInc.

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For every forest destroyed
For every elf who fights back

Little one,

It will be years before you read this story, and longer still before you find the messages I've smuggled to you in it. By the time you read this, the world of Terijian will probably be gone. It seems the elves who live there have disappeared. I wait and wait, but they never return. The elves seem to be dying with their forests.

But I'll let you in on something I wish I'd learned a long time ago. No one is born an elf; there are only those who choose to act as elves.

Perhaps I didn't learn this in time to save Terijian, but if you are brave enough to hope and strong enough to act, then maybe I will have saved Terijian after all—in you.

The world is yours. Share it. Defend it.

I wait anxiously to see you among us, and to greet you with open arms!

Yours,

S.

1

Once there was a little boy named Connor. He was a small child, much smaller than the rest of his peers, and he didn't get along with them much. In fact, he spent a lot of time playing alone.

Connor lived in a neighborhood in which the only other children were very young, too young to walk, let alone play. Don't start feeling bad for Connor, though—he was quite content with being on his own.

Connor's house was built on the edge of a great forest. This is where he spent much of his time between waking up and falling asleep. Little Connor would go into the forests just beyond where his lawn ended, and he would enter a world of make-believe.

Hours were spent playing in this make-believe world. It was not surprising for an animal there to speak to you. Faeries and elves existed and played there, too, and magick was as common as the warm summer breeze.

Connor affectionately called the woods and the world that existed in them Terijian. It was named after a mythic elf that Connor believed had once lived in the forest, who had, according to legend, fought off many great beasts and dragons that wished to destroy it.

Little did Connor know that the world of Terijian actually existed! This secret world of enchantment was hidden just beyond his world of make-believe, right next to the world of mundane things.

There were all kinds of secrets in this world. Magick did exist, and it flowed through everything that lived. Faeries flew through the air by day and at night their lights danced in the sky. And the best-kept secret was the elves that lived in the forest and protected it from harm.

This fantastic everyday world was hidden to Connor. That is, it was, until one day early in summer, a new family moved in down the street. Connor heard that there was a young girl who lived there. Even though he was excited at the prospect of another child his age, he was too shy to introduce himself.

One day, Connor peered out his window and saw the little girl trotting down the street. She had her hands in her pockets as she made her way down the road, up his driveway, and finally right up to his front step. There was a tap at the door, and little Connor peeked out the window before pulling the door open.

The little girl stood on the step wearing a shirt two sizes too big. She withdrew one hand from a pocket of her short shorts and said,

"Hi!" with a big smile and a slight wave. "I'm Moriko. My family just moved in up the block."

"I'm Connor," he stated, his hand still cautiously on the door handle.

"Wanna play?" she asked, kicking her foot.

"Alright." Connor grabbed his shoes and stepped onto the porch.

"But I have to be back before dusk."

"Okay," replied Moriko as Connor tied his shoes. "So what do you usually do around here?"

Connor hopped up and suggested, "We could go in the woods and play make-believe."

Moriko agreed, and the two little ones scurried through Connor's backyard up to the edge of the lawn, and then stepped into the forest. The leaves rustled in the wind, blocking out the busy noises of the rest of the world.

The two children began playing a game of make-believe as they entered the woods. Connor became Astor, the druid of Terijian, guiding the warrior Ylva to a sacred grove deep in the forest.

As they journeyed through the forest, the children saw two young deer walking along a path through the trees. Te children stopped their play and watched. One deer nuzzled its head against the other before galloping off through the woods. The other pranced quickly behind the first, and the two circled and chased each other into the forest.

Little Moriko and Connor crouched together, looking after the two young deer in amazement. Then Moriko glanced at Connor, bumped her head against his, and darted off through the woods.

Connor jumped up and chased after the laughing girl, running through tangled branches and jumping over logs. The rushing forest slowed as they circled each other, giggling in glee.

Connor tagged Moriko before hopping off in another direction. Moriko was much faster than Connor, and she caught up quickly.

She reached out her arms and tackled him, and the two rolled down a hill. Leaves flew up as the two tumbled down.

Lying in the leaves at the trunk of a young cottonwood, the two looked up through its branches and tried to catch their breath. "Have you ever noticed how different trees look from the bottom?" Moriko asked as she gazed upward. Connor looked up, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was as if he had never seen a tree before.

As he lay there appreciating the view of branches against a backdrop of leaves and sky, a tiny squirrel poked its head out from the branches above them. This sent the two children into fits of giggles. The squirrel cocked its head upward towards the tree branches, and Moriko asked, "What do you think it's trying to tell us?"

Connor shrugged as the squirrel scurried up the tree. Moriko jumped up and grabbed one of the lower branches. She pulled herself up onto the first branch, stood up, and looked for another. As she swung up onto another branch, Connor yelled at her, "What are you doing?"

"Come on up," Moriko yelled back, putting her foot on a thick branch and boosting herself up onto the next.

"Nah," Connor said, standing up. "Climbing trees is dumb."

Moriko just gave a little laugh before pulling herself up onto a branch. She sat there resting for a moment. "You're just afraid."

"No!" protested Connor. But in fact, Connor was afraid of high places. It can be very hard for people to admit their fears, but it is harder still to face them. Connor yelled up to Moriko, "I just don't feel like climbing. Let's do something else."

"Come on," Moriko replied as she swung her legs, "we can climb to the top and look over the top of the forest!"

It would be a nice view, Connor thought, but it's way too dangerous. Even thinking of sitting on the lowest branch made his stomach uneasy.

Moriko stood up on her branch and stepped over to a neighboring one. One of her feet slipped as she moved, twisting Connor's stomach. She peered through the branches and leaves of the tree, and she slowly parted some of the smaller branches as she inched along the branch.

"Hey Connor!" she yelled down as she peered out of the tree,

"There's a nest over there!"

Connor's eyes followed her pointing finger. Squinting in the bright sun, he noticed a bundle of twigs by the top of a nearby oak tree. A bird was perched in the nest, watching its surroundings.

"Let's go look at it."

Sliding down the tree, Moriko got to the ground even faster than she had gotten to the top. Te two little ones scurried over to the grove of oaks. Looking up through the branches, Moriko asked, "What kind of bird do you think it is?"

The bird's light brown head scanned the tops of the trees intently. It rustled its feathers, revealing a patchwork of brown and white, before lowering its dark red tail over its little ones.

It only took Connor a moment before he exclaimed, "It's a hawk!"

Moriko started to climb a branch, "Let's go talk to it."

"No, you don't want to scare it away." Connor pulled her down.

"We have to make friends with it first."

"Good idea."

Connor admired the beautiful creature as he said, "I want one of its feathers."

"Ask her for one," Moriko replied.

Connor looked up at the hawk and yelled, "Mrs. Hawk!"

"Hey!" Moriko hit Connor. "How do you know that she's married?"

"Oh yeah." He started over: "Ms. Hawk? Would you mind giving me one of your feathers?"

The hawk looked down towards him before turning her eyes back towards the forest. Tiny hawks tried to peek out from under their mother's feathers. To Connor, they just looked like puffs of fluff.

"She says you have to earn it," Moriko stated with a laugh.

"Earn it?" Connor thought. Some people admire animals by killing them to hang on walls or wear as clothing, but that seemed like a dumb idea to Connor. "How do I earn a feather?" he asked.

The hawk spread its wings and flew past the trees and over a clearing. The two stepped forward and watched the creature fly. It swooped down over the valley that lay between the two sides of the forest.

It screeched as it soared over the woods near the end of the valley. Circling the trees a few more times, the hawk let out its cry, "KEEeer!"

Moriko looked over at Connor. "She said that to earn a feather, we have to save the forest."

"From what?" Connor was puzzled. The forest had never been in any kind of real trouble before.

Moriko looked out across the clearing. "I'm not sure what, but I think it might be over there." She raised a finger to where the hawk circled. Noises roared out from the trees, and wisps of black smoke rose above the forest's canopy.

"Come on, Astor. Let's go."

Connor and Moriko walked through the valley. The grass around them stretched to over twice their height. It whipped and waved as the wind blew between the forests. The rustling of a thousand leaves filled the air.

The two little ones followed the wisps of black smoke that lingered in the air. By the time they entered the other side of the forest, they could no longer see the smoke through the canopy. Instead, the two followed the growls coming from deep in the forest.

Stepping up the steep hill, the two adventurers arrived at the edge of a clearing. Connor had never seen this clearing before. There was no life on the ground. There were no flowers or even grass. Instead, there was only dirt and caked mud.

Ancient trees lay on their sides, naked and stripped of their branches. Giant entangling roots were severed from their trunks, still grasping uprooted soil. Where young trees had once stood, now there were only snapped and broken trunks.

Connor fell into the giant tracks that cut through the ground. His knees sunk in the mud as he knelt before a dying tree. Little Connor could not help but let tears fill his eyes. And although some think it is a terrible thing for boys to cry, especially in front of a girl, Connor let the tiny tears fall. They trickled down his nose and dropped to wet the ground.

Moriko looked across the stretch of barren ground before sitting down on her feet and wrapping her arms around Connor, holding him tight. Connor let himself cry in her arms for a while before eventually rising to his feet.

Moriko looked away from his teary eyes and wiped at her own.

The two looked up the hill. A big yellow machine sat at the end of the path of broken trees and torn ground.

"That's what we need to save the forest from," Moriko stated as she gazed steadily at the machine. "That is what's destroying the forest."

The machine looked like a dingy yellow dragon of monstrous proportions. The tracks alone were as wide as Connor's outstretched arms, and the wheels must have been at least twice his height. At the front of the machine, there were massive claws and buzzing saws that cut like gnashing teeth.

"How are we supposed to stop that?" Connor stammered, disheartened.

Moriko sat quietly, looking at the broken trees. "I don't know."

"Maybe the elves will help?" Connor wondered aloud with just the slightest glimmer of hope in his eye.

"The elves?" asked Moriko curiously.

"Yeah, elves!" Connor replied, looking back at Moriko with wide eyes. "Elves live in forests and protect them. Forests like this one."

"Oh, I believe in elves," Moriko reassured him. "But do you really think they live in this forest?"

"Sure. Elves live in all forests. They only leave when they can no longer protect the forest. That's when forests die."

"How do you suppose we contact these elves?" Moriko asked suspiciously.

"I'm not sure," replied Connor, "But maybe they appear when they're needed." Connor took notice of the darkening sky. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and its light was quickly fading. "It's getting dark though. I probably need to be getting home."

Moriko took a look at the sky and another look back at the machine.

"We need to come back."

"We will tomorrow," said Connor as he began walking back into the forest, "but I need to get home, or I'll be in big trouble."

Sighing heavily, Moriko turned and ran after Connor. The two little ones rushed home as the sky darkened. When they passed into Connor's backyard, they parted ways. Connor crept into his house just as dinner was set on the table.

"Connor!" His mother looked at his muddy shoes and dirty overalls. "Wash up and change! Dinner's ready."

Connor kicked off his shoes, hurried up the stairs, and changed clothes. After washing his hands, he finally sat down at the table. Connor remained quiet as he ate. His mother peered over at him and watched as the little boy pushed his food around, sighed, and took distracted bites.

"You're awfully quiet, Connor."

The little boy shrugged as he stared down at his plate.

"Is something wrong?"

Resting his face against his hand, Connor replied, "Why is the forest being destroyed?"

"Destroyed?" His mother asked with surprise.

"There was a big yellow machine out in the woods, and it had cut down a lot of the trees."

"It's not being destroyed, Connor. They're clearing the way for a new road so more people can move near this neighborhood. I'll bet that in one of those houses there will be another kid your age, and you will have another friend."

Connor thought about this. He liked the idea of having more kids his age around, but Moriko had just moved in. Besides, he liked the forest more.

"But what about the forest? Can't people move somewhere else?"

"Well, you see Connor, they are also setting up electric lines. Not only will we have cheaper electricity, but we will also be able to get more channels on the television."

Connor thought about this again. He liked the idea of having more channels on the television, but he didn't watch it much anymore. Besides, he liked the forest more.

"But what about the animals in the forest, mother?"

"You know, Connor, they are actually planning to build a park too. Instead of having to play around in the woods, you will be able to go on slides and swings."

Connor thought about this, too. He liked playing on slides and swings, but it was never as fun as exploring and adventuring in the woods. Finally, Connor came to a conclusion. He liked the forest more.

Like most mothers, Connor's mother worried about him. She knew it might be unsafe for him to be out there near the construction site. What if a cut tree fell on him, or worse? She forbid Connor to go near the site.

"Connor, I want you to stay away from the construction and the machines. It's dangerous, and you might get hurt. Promise me you won't go near it."

Connor thought about the hawk and his adventure to earn a feather, but his mother had told him not to go there. So, quietly, he agreed, "I promise I won't."

After finishing his food and washing his plate, Connor spent the rest of the time between dinner and bedtime pondering the situation in the woods. When his mother sent him off to bed, he was still quite confused.

He brushed his teeth, changed into his pajamas, and even pulled up his covers, but Connor was still restless. He lay in bed thinking for what felt like forever. He didn't like that the woods were being destroyed, but he didn't know what else he could do.

There is nothing I can do about it. This is too big of a situation for someone as little as me.

Just as this thought came to his mind, there was a tap at his window on the other side of the room. He rolled out of bed just as there came another tap. He crept forward slowly, and as he peered out the window another tap made him jump back.

He looked out again. Across his lawn, little Moriko waved at him, holding a handful of tiny rocks. Connor opened his window, and she crept across the lawn.

"What are you doing here?" Connor demanded. "It's the middle of the night."

"Let's go out in the woods," Moriko said with a mischievous grin.

"What?" Connor said in shock. "It's midnight, I can't go out. Plus, I told my mom I wouldn't go out there anymore. I would get in trouble for sure."

"Only if we get caught." Moriko tugged at his arm with a grin.

"Let's go! We'll be back in a little bit."

"Moriko, no!"

Putting her hands on her hips, Moriko challenged him. "What are you, scared?"

"No." Connor paused. But when he couldn't think of an excuse, he said in defeat, "I'll go change."

"Hurry!" Moriko whispered with a giggle.

Connor slipped on his black overalls and tied up his shoes before sneaking out the window. The two crept through the backyard and into the woods. The canopy of leaves hid the forest from the bright light of the moon, leaving a world shrouded in darkness.

Now, Connor wasn't especially afraid of the dark, but that had always been in the darkness of his own room—a mere veil pulled over familiar surroundings. But as he and Moriko made their way through the woods, he experienced a completely different feeling. It wasn't so much a fear of the dark, but more of a fear of what hid in the dark. Little Connor couldn't help but feel as if there were something following him.

Connor whispered into the night, "What are we doing out here, anyway?"

"I wanted to get a closer look at the machine."

Hearing the echo of twigs snapping, Connor stammered, "Can't we do this when it's light out?"

"Of course not," Moriko said matter-of-factly, "that's when the workers are there."

The two little ones trekked towards the worksite. As they walked through the valley, the moon provided nearly enough light to make it seem like it was day.

Moving through the wavering reeds, Connor whispered, "Did you hear that?"

Moriko paused. Te grass around her swayed in a breeze that was quite cool for a summer's night. "Hear what?"

"I thought I heard whispering."

The two stood still as the grass around them swayed and whipped in the wind. "Connor, it's just the wind."

"I heard voices," Connor pleaded, "I swear."

Moriko looked cautiously through the grass as they neared the edge of the valley. She raised her hand slowly, and through the waving grass, Connor made out the shape of a wolf in the trees. At first there was one, then there was another, and then the whole pack materialized slowly out of the forest.

Moriko stepped out of the grass, and she slowly tiptoed forward. But she suddenly stopped as one of the wolves paused and raised its head towards the two children. Moriko looked into the creature's eyes before turning her own eyes away. The wolf took a step forward, and then another. Moriko moved forward, ever so slowly, and the wolf bolted through the trees. The pack turned and ran with it as it darted through the woods.

Connor let his breath go, and the two began ascending the hill. The moonlight illuminated the barren wasteland that the machine had created. As the two little ones neared the clearing, they began to see movement in the woods.

At first, it was as if a blinding wind was blowing through the trees, and it sounded as if animals were scattering through the forest around them. Leaves rustled and fallen branches snapped as figures rushed past. Moriko and Connor ducked to the ground.

The forest's awakening broke the silence of the night.

Were the trees moving and the forest alive? As fast as this thought came to the children, the noise stopped. The forest grew still, and an eerie silence crept across the clearing, like calm before a storm.

Connor and Moriko crept to the edge of the worksite, crouching behind a fallen tree. Their tiny eyes darted across the surreal landscape of barren ground and torn up roots. Sitting in the middle of this forsaken grove was the yellow monster, sleeping in the moonlight.

Just as Moriko was about to ask about the noise, they saw five dark figures standing at the edge of the clearing. They emerged from the trees in complete black as if they carried the forest's darkness with them. The figures dispersed swiftly across the barren clearing.

"Do you think those shadows guard the machine?" Moriko asked as she whispered into Connor's ear. "They might know we are here."

One of the shadows stood near the edge of the forest peering down the barren strip. Two others moved across the site picking up chainsaws that lay scattered around the worksite. Another ran towards the machine and slid between its massive tracks. The last dropped a bag near the side of the machine.

The two little ones watched in silence as this orchestra of movement took place. They did not know what the two were doing with the tools, and they could not see what the one was doing underneath the machine, but they watched as the one with the bag shook a can noisily.

Among the clatter of the group, a hiss served as a backdrop as the last figure moved the can across the machine. The two little ones watched in puzzlement as the figure sprayed in big red letters:

ELF

A smile shot across the faces of the little ones, and in a burst of excitement, they both exclaimed, in voices probably a bit too loud for their circumstance, "It's the elves!"

The last syllable echoed out across the clearing and through the woods. As if the two had flipped a switch, the elves stopped immediately. The one overseeing the group quickly waved the others to the woods. The figures grabbed whatever gear they had and scattered into the dark forest.

Moriko and Connor jumped out of their hiding spot and into the clearing, yelling, "No! Wait!"

But the figures had left in a trail of rustling leaves and snapping twigs. The two stood bewildered in the middle of the worksite.

2

The next day, the two little ones snuck through the woods to look over the worksite. The big yellow machine was moving across the clearing by the time they had arrived. It had taken the workers half the day to clean up from the night before. Half the chainsaws were unusable, but the machine roared after the crew of workers replaced a few of the parts that had been damaged. The two little ones walked away from the site, their feet heavy with disappointment.

"What are we going to do now?" Connor asked as he kicked at rocks. "We scared away the elves, the only hope of saving the forest."

Moriko stopped to sit down on a fallen tree. One side of the tree was charcoal; it must have been struck by lightning. "If the elves are gone, then we're going to have to be the elves and save the forest ourselves."

For a moment, Moriko felt sad for the great tree that had fallen and burned. But all around its roots, little plants and flowers attempted to peek out of the ashes of the tree. The little plants all reached towards the light that shined through the new opening in the canopy.

The tree Moriko was sitting on had once been a great tree. Its branches had reached across the top of the forest, blocking the sunlight from all of its brothers and sisters and all the little plants below it.

Mother Nature had a way of destroying what was destructive, whether with fire or lightning. Moriko ran her fingers across the intricate patterns of the burnt wood, admiring Nature's destructive beauty. As she looked at the little blooming flowers, she wondered, or is it a creative beauty?

Connor sat on the fallen tree, next to Moriko. "Do you really think we can stop the machine?"

"I'm not sure, Connor." Moriko rubbed the black ash and charcoal off her fingertips. "But isn't it worth trying?"

As Moriko gathered ash and soot from the fallen tree and put it in a little pouch tied to her belt loop, Connor looked around at the fallen tree. "Do you think we could pile some of the logs in front of the machine?"

Moriko smiled and exclaimed, "That's a great idea! With all the trees in front of the machine, it wouldn't be able to move."

The children grew excited as they talked over their plans. They would go and find the biggest trees that the machine cut down, and the two of them would make a great big pile the size of the machine so that it wouldn't be able to move any farther.

Connor interrupted their scheming to ask, "So when do you want to do this?"

There was no hesitation on Moriko's part: "Tonight!"

The two little ones finished the last details of their plan and ran back to their homes. It seemed to take forever for night to roll around, and by the time Connor went to bed, he was restless and waiting anxiously for his parents to fall asleep.

Connor grew impatient as he waited through the night. He thought that the sun was going to rise by the time he heard Moriko tap on his window. He crawled out of bed and looked out his window to see a thousand stars dancing above.

"Are you ready for this?" asked Moriko. Connor couldn't tell if her voice was tense from excitement or fear.

The two of them walked through the woods while quietly whispering their plan back and forth. Caught up in this, Connor barely took note of the dark surroundings. When he finally noticed the darkness they were walking through, he looked up to the stars. I'm too in love with the stars to be afraid of the dark, Little Connor thought.

The two little ones reached the worksite after running through their plan for about the sixty-sixth time. They looked past the machine and found a few of the cut trees that the workers hadn't taken away.

The two went to either end of one of the trees, wrapped their tiny arms around the bark, and lifted in unison. They pulled and strained and strained and pulled, but the tree was just too heavy for them.

Determined not to give up, they looked for a smaller one. They wrapped their arms around another tree and again struggled to lift it, but they could barely pull it off the ground before dropping it again.

"This isn't working," said Connor as they failed in their third attempt to move a tree. "We have to try something else."

The two of them found a pile of trees that had been cut into smaller pieces. Although the pieces were only the size of little Connor, they were considerably heavy. But with the two of them lifting with all of their strength, they managed to move a log into the path of the machine.

They collapsed on the ground breathing heavily. Moriko looked over at Connor. Between gasps of air, she said, "This is going… to take… a while." Connor responded with a nod and a heavy sigh.

The little ones continued moving the logs in front of the machine. Connor's arms grew sore, and his back ached from so much lifting. But the pile they were making wasn't very big yet, so despite the pain, the two continued.

Finally, when they couldn't lift any more, they gave up. The pile they had made wasn't quite as tall as the machine, or even as tall as little Connor. The two finished the pile off by gathering fallen limbs and branches and dragging them onto it. They continued until the morning birds began singing to greet the rising sun.

The two looked at the pile they had made, and they smiled at their work. It looked as if it could stop the machine, and judging by Connor's sore arms, it certainly felt that way.

"We better hurry home before our parents wake up," Moriko said as she listened to the birds. She snuck a grin in as she continued;

"We'll come back and celebrate our victory later."

The two little ones staggered back through the forest, climbed through their windows, and collapsed into their beds. Connor fell asleep immediately with his arms sprawled across his sheets.

The next morning, the two met up outside. They yawned even though it was nearing midday, and they rubbed the crust out of their sleepy eyes. Te children walked blearily to the worksite. Their bodies and their muscles ached with every movement. As Connor yawned, all he could think about was going back to his bed.

The children found a tree to hide behind near the worksite. They peeked their little heads out and saw men standing around the pile of logs. A few of the men scratched their heads as they looked at it. A few of the other men began grabbing pieces and setting them aside.

It only took a few men to undo all the work that had taken Connor and Moriko the entire night. It was only a matter of time before the machine started up and the men revved up their chainsaws. And with more than half a day's work ahead of them, the men in orange began cutting down the trees.

The two children sat in disbelief, their mouths hanging open. But instead of getting discouraged and despairing, they went right back to planning.

"We could try throwing rocks at it. Maybe it will break." Little Connor shrugged at his own suggestion.

They watched as teams of men in orange cut away the branches of a tree. Te machine followed behind, grabbing with its massive claws. Te giant saws roared as they ripped through the tree.

"You think rocks will do it?" Moriko asked.

"I don't know." Connor watched as the machine lifted the tree and dropped it in a pile of other trees. It seemed that something so massive could never be stopped. "But it's worth a shot."

The two kids remained at the worksite for the rest of the day. They watched the workers' progress through the woods; although it was slower than usual, they still managed to clear quite a lot.

When the whistle blew and the workers left, it was nearing sundown. Connor and Moriko hurried through the woods and back into their homes. They both ate up their dinners and quickly prepared for bed. When they were sure everyone in their houses was asleep, they crawled out their windows and dashed across the forest. Along the way, they gathered as many rocks as they could find, carrying them in their shirts.

When they arrived at the worksite, each took aim and began throwing rocks at the windshield. It took several shots before Connor hit the glass with a loud thunk.

The two kept trying, throwing the rocks harder and harder. They tried from different distances, up close and farther away. They tried throwing them from different angles and from the side. But whenever the rocks would hit the glass, there was the same thunking noise.

That was until Moriko picked up a nasty little rock, all jagged and rough. She threw it straight at the front windshield, and her efforts were rewarded with a loud crack.

The two jumped and cheered at the crack they had made in the windshield. They celebrated by throwing more rocks. A few of the flying rocks caused the glass to crack some more. And as more rocks were thrown, some more! The two children threw rocks until their pile was gone and they were picking rocks up off the ground.

It wasn't long until their arms grew sore, and they paused to look at the windshield. The crack extended from the top all the way down the glass. In the moon's white light, it looked like a bolt of lightning in a stormy sky.

Tired and proud of their work, the two children dragged themselves back through the forest and across their lawns. They pulled themselves through their windows before collapsing on their beds. It only took seconds for both of them to drift off to sleep.

The next morning, Connor woke early, so early that his mother was still in the kitchen making breakfast for herself. He snuck in and up to the table. "You're up early," she commented curiously as she prepared him a bowl of granola.

The little boy ate his cereal in silence. “You look awfully tired,” she continued. “Why don’t you go back to bed?”

“I’ll be fine,” Little Connor said as he rubbed his tired eyes. He always enjoyed staying up late and waking up early, and it was best when he had a good reason for doing so. “I’m going to go see if Moriko wants to play in a little bit.”

“You have been playing in the woods a lot. You haven’t been going near the worksite, have you?” His mother asked.

“Only a few times,” Connor said almost truthfully. “They move a lot each day.”

“Well, just stay clear of there. Tere’s been a lot of problems out there, and they probably don’t need any kids running around causing them trouble.”

“We’ll try not too be too much of a problem for them,” said little Connor with a mischievous little grin.

Connor finished up his breakfast and washed his dishes before running out to go to Moriko’s house. When he stepped out his door, she was already sitting on his porch.

“Are we going to go look now?” Moriko asked anxiously.

Connor nodded. “But we have to be careful that they don’t see us.”

The two hurried through the woods, jumping over logs and dodging trees. Both were filled with excitement, and a little nervousness, as they ran to the site. They slowed as they approached the barren

clearing, and crept up to it carefully.

The two little ones had to hold their mouths to keep themselves from giggling as the men in orange spat and swore. The glass of the yellow machine was completely cracked. It looked worse in the daylight than it had the night before.

The men at the worksite were trying to fix the window. Their attempts to remove the window failed, provoking mouthfuls of giggles from the children. The men gave up and removed the door’s hinges instead. It was not long before a new one arrived, and although it took them half the day, the machine started up, almost looking brand new.

The children’s excitement turned to despair as the machine rolled once again through the woods, clearing a path for the men with chainsaws.

“We have to figure out something,” demanded little Moriko. The two children sat on the edge of the worksite for most of the day wondering how to stop the machine. The sun passed halfway through the sky, and the workers eventually took a break for lunch. Connor was almost ready to give up when he saw two squirrels bustling through the brush in the forest.

The squirrels, their mouths full of acorns, scanned the worksite from one side before darting across it. They scurried through the muddy tracks of the machine and then climbed up its massive wheels. They worked hurriedly as they stored their acorns in the openings of the machine.

Connor pondered this as he watched the squirrels dart off into the forest. “What do you think the elves were doing under the machine?”

Moriko rolled her eyes. “Trying to stop it, no doubt.”

“Yeah, I know.” Connor messed with his hair. “But do you think that is where you kill it?”

Moriko stood quiet for a moment. “Of course!” Her eyes grew wide. “The underbelly is the weakest part of the dragon. I bet it is the same with the machine!”

“What if we jammed it with rocks and stones?” Connor pointed at the door with the broken window that lay abandoned on the site.

"You saw what they could do against the window. What if we stuck them up inside the machine?"

Moriko let out a short sigh and smiled as she looked at the quiet machine. "Let's do it tonight."

That evening, even though little Connor's eyes were sore and his body tired, his excitement still grew as he waited for the sun to go down and the moon and stars to come out.

Late that night, the two little ones crawled out of their beds, snuck out their windows, and ran through the woods, just as they had the previous nights. They approached the worksite through the thick forests. The barren strip of land stretched across the woods, farther than little Connor had noticed. "If they keep cutting, they're going to go right through the forest."

Moriko smiled as she picked up a rock. "Don't worry. We'll stop them."

The two tiptoed around the machine, eyeing it from different angles. While Moriko slid under the machine, Connor picked up rocks and stones that lay around the site. He made a little pile next to the place Moriko's feet stuck out from under the machine. Ten he laid down a pile for himself, too, and crawled under the opposite side.

It was very dark underneath the machine; little Connor had to run his hands across its belly. His hands slid across cold and greasy metal until they were covered in a sticky mess. Feeling for anything that moved or opened, he began jamming rocks into gears and sticks into moving parts.

It wasn't long before the two had used up their piles. They crawled out and looked for any objects that they missed. Connor found some stones and lodged them between the wheels and the treads of the machine.

Moriko, while examining the machine, found a cap that was unscrewed. She took a whiff of the opening. "Ick!" She said through coughs. "It smells like a gas station."

She took handfuls of dirt and poured them down the hole. Connor took a handful of tiny pebbles and dropped them down the hole. "Even the littlest ones can stop a dragon."

The two worked all night until their eyelids were heavy and they could find no more rocks at the site. The next morning, Connor awoke with a smile beaming across his face. As he rolled out of bed, there was a tapping on his window. He walked over to see Moriko looking up from the lawn with a smile that matched his own.

He skipped breakfast, running right out the front door. And he found it wasn't easy to run and pull his shoes on at the same time! He met Moriko at the side of the house, and the two scurried into the woods with his shoes still untied.

Moriko kept a few paces ahead of him, and Connor struggled to keep up with her. As he darted across the forest with the wind blowing in his hair, he felt wild and free. He felt like a wolf.

The sun was just peeking over the tops of the trees as they crossed the valley. When they got to the edge of the worksite they both collapsed, panting for breath. They waited there quietly, hidden behind a small bush. It wasn't long before the men in orange started appearing. The little ones waited anxiously to see the defeat of the dragon.

One of the men opened the glass door to the machine and sat down. He turned the keys to the engine and with a loud sputter, the engine started. This sound was quickly followed by a series of cracking noises.

The man frowned as he pressed down on the gas. The machine moaned and creaked as it moved forwards a foot. It stopped with a loud bang from the engine. Clouds of dark smoke came from the exhaust, and then from the front of the machine. It wasn't long until black smoke filled the whole worksite.

Big grins filled the faces of two little children. The men in orange crowded around the machine. The treads had been lodged off the wheels, and the engine spewed more smoke than if it had been on fire. The men spat and swore just as they had before.

The children waited as a truck pulled up to the worksite. It took the whole crew pushing on the machine, and it still would not budge.

The children had to cover their mouths to stop themselves from giggling as the men fell in the mud.

Half the day passed before the men had the machine lifted off the ground. By dinnertime, they had the treads fixed and back on the wheels, but still it seemed like there was no hope of getting the machine to start.

The crew struggled to push the machine onto the trailer. They pushed and pulled, but they could not move the machine more than a few inches. One of the men had the idea of attaching the machine to the truck. They rigged up chains and the truck pulled the machine slowly up onto the trailer.

By the time the truck finally pulled the machine away, the men were packing up their things and leaving the worksite. Moriko grabbed Connor by the hand, and the two ran through the trees. They jumped and yelped as the forest flew past them.

Moriko tackled Connor and held him tight. "Connor, we did it! We stopped the dragon."

As the children raised their noses to the sky, their howls echoed through the forest.

Connor woke up late the next morning, or at least much later than he had been waking recently. The sun had already risen and his mother had already finished breakfast. Connor prepared himself some toast and poured a glass of juice. He took a big sip as his mother commented, "It's been a while since I've seen you in the morning."

Connor shrugged while taking his time to eat his toast. He washed off his dishes, tied his shoes, and made his way out the door. Moriko met him halfway down the block with a mischievous little grin to match his own.

The two ventured through the forest, which felt surprisingly calm. The trees were absolutely still, and only a few birds flew through the sky. It was as if the forest was sleeping to recover from its fight against the machine.

The two little ones made it to the clearing and found it absolutely still. There was no machine. There were no chainsaws. And there were no men in orange.

The children jumped and danced around the worksite. They both shouted and cheered. Connor grabbed Moriko's hand and they spun around in circles before falling in the dirt. The two lay on the ground with their hands running through the earth. Only a day before the spot had been barren and dead, but now the little ones saw it as a source of new life.

Moriko and Connor relaxed at the site of their victorious battle. Moriko watched the clouds floating past, while Connor listened to the birds filling the air with song.

When the sun was in the middle of the sky, the two little ones heard a screeching call off in the distance. Connor shot a look at Moriko and jumped to his feet: "It's the hawk!"

The little ones ran out into the valley to see the bird swoop low through the grass. It emerged with a small rodent in its talons and flew up to the trees, gliding along the forest's canopy. Moriko and Connor ran through the valley, following the hawk's flight. A cool breeze blew through the grass that reached over their heads.

The two children made their way through the forest until they could make out the hawk's nest above them. The two tiny hawks there paid no attention to the food their mother had brought

home; they perched awkwardly on the branch, extending their tiny wings and letting the air blow through their feathers.

"Ms. Hawk, guess what?" little Moriko shouted up the tree. "We stopped the machine. Te workers took it away yesterday!"

The hawk stuck its beak in its wing and began cleaning its feathers. Te little hawks hopped along the branch, flapped their wings violently.

Moriko turned to Connor. "She thanks us for making the forest safer for her children."

"You're welcome, Ms. Hawk," Connor shouted with his head thrown back. "Does this mean I get a feather?"

The hawk pushed the meal to a baby hawk Connor hadn't noticed before. The tiny hawk looked smaller than its siblings, and it sat and ate while the others tried to fly. The mother hawk looked down at little Connor and then flew up to the top of the tree, where it sat watching over the forest.

"What did I do wrong?" asked little Connor. He had done his best to stop the machine, even if it had taken the two of them a few days.

"Maybe you just haven't earned it yet." Moriko shrugged. "See the baby hawks?"

"Yeah," said Connor. "What about them?"

"They look different, don't they?"

Connor looked up at them. They sure did look a lot bigger than the last time he'd visited the nest, but that wasn't what Moriko was getting at. Connor could barely make it out, but there was a difference in the little hawks.

"Their color is a bit different. When we first saw them, they just looked like little white puffs, but now, they have tiny little feathers. And see how they are trying to fly?" Moriko pointed at the little hawks. They hopped around on the branch, flapping their wings in the breeze. "But they can't quite do it yet."

The two children watched as the tiniest little hawk edged out of the nest. It tiptoed timidly across the tree. Its siblings paused to look at it before returning to testing their wings.

"But once they learn to fly…" Moriko began, but suddenly stopped as the tiny hawk flapped its wings in the slight breeze. Connor's eyes lit up. "…then they earn their feathers!"

3

Several days passed in the forest. The sun rose over its canopy, traveled across the sky, then sank into the trees again. The two little children spent a lot of time in the woods. Now that their forest was safe again, they had many adventures exploring it.

One day, while the children were following deer paths, they found a secret grove in the valley. Beyond it was a small clearing they had never noticed before, as it was hidden by the tall grasses and surrounded by thorny trees. It was the perfect place for deer to sleep without worries.

Little white fluffs floated in the air above the grove. Connor looked at them. "What do you think those are?" he asked Moriko.

"Faeries!" she exclaimed.

"Really?" asked Connor, jumping in the air to catch one. As he jumped, the little fluff flew up just out of his grasp.

Moriko laughed as Connor jumped and missed again. "You can't catch them, Connor."

"Watch me try," he whispered as he crept up on one that was floating slowly along the ground. He moved his hands slowly and gently cupped them around it.

"I got one!" he shouted, jumping up and down.

"Nope. I bet you didn't."

Connor held out his hands. "Here, look."

Moriko giggled. "Looks like a piece of fluff to me."

Connor let it fly up into the air. "How do I know which ones are fluff and which ones are faeries?"

"You can catch the fluffs, but you can't catch the faeries."

The two children laughed as they jumped up into the air trying to catch a faerie. They played in the grove well into midday, and like Moriko had said, they were only able to catch the little fluffs.

The two little ones laid down and sprawled out in the grove. They laid and watched the faeries fly past well into the night. Some time after the sun had set but before the stars came out, little colors began to move in the sky.

There were little flickers of blue, barely noticeable in the night. Then a bit of green appeared and the colors began to grow. The wall of green and blue in the sky began to change hues to violet and then to red. As it changed to orange and yellow, the wall of colors began to move and change shape, slightly at first, and then faster. As the hues slowly cycled, the wall began to dance across the sky.

The children never fell asleep that night. They laid out in the grove watching the faerie lights until the stars took over the night sky. Soon enough, the morning sun peeked over the horizon.

The sun passed over the forest three times before little Connor and little Moriko returned to the worksite. As they walked up through the woods to the clearing, there was a distinct buzz through the forest. Moriko looked at Connor, her eyes wide.

The two little ones ran up the hill, and their mouths dropped with horror when they saw that the men with their orange trucks filled the clearing. Only a few moments later, the machine was rolled onto the site. Connor thought it was a brand new one, but it could have been the old one all fixed up.

Both the children rubbed their eyes and shook their heads as the machine started up and rolled forward. It grabbed hold of a tree with its upper claws and cut into it with the lower saws.

Moriko shook her head and whispered, "No. No. No."

Connor felt his eyes water up, but he clenched his fists in the earth below him. He squeezed the dirt in his fingers until it turned to a caked mud. The machine cut down the first tree, then a second, then a third. Little Connor wanted to throw a rock through its front window. He wanted to jam sticks into its treads and pour dirt in its gas tank.

But they had tried this all before, and the machine still returned.

"We have to do something," Connor pleaded, "anything to stop them."

"We tried, Connor." Moriko put a hand on his shoulder. "We tried everything, and it failed."

"But…" Connor paused. He was angry, and his heart pounded heavily. But there was nothing he could do.

Moriko stood and walked away quietly. Connor didn't follow her this time. He walked through the forest, winding along the deer paths. He appreciated the life that moved around him. The squirrels running through the trees, and the branches swaying in the breeze. He knew that this might be the last time they would be there. After wandering for a while, he ended up at the hawk's tree. He forced a weak smile as he walked up to it.

The tiniest hawk was hopping along the edge of the branch. The little bird flapped its wings hard in the blowing breeze. Connor watched as the bird struggled to learn to fly. The little hawk edged to end of the branch and, without any more hesitation, dove off. At first, it gently glided around the tree, but along the way, its tiny body lost control and began to fall faster and faster.

Connor panicked. "Ms. Hawk! Ms. Hawk!"

The little bird was nearly in free fall when its mother swooped down. Connor placed a hand on the old oak tree. He tilted his head all the way back until it rested on his shoulders. He bit his lip as the mother flew past and caught the tumbling bird in her great talons.

She screeched as she flapped her wings, veering back up to her nest. She placed the little hawk on the branch, and stood next to it extending her own wings. Te wind blew gently through her out- stretched feathers as she showed the little one how to fly.

Little Connor sat down beneath the tree and crossed his legs. He rested his head on his folded hands and pondered for a long time. He thought, Maybe Moriko is right. What is the point of trying if you are just going to fail?

Hours passed as Connor sat, on the edge of giving up. The sun had long passed the middle of the sky when he was wrenched from his thoughts by a roar deep in the forest.

Connor moved forward and looked through the trees. The mother hawk began emitting a fierce screech. Far through the thick trees, Connor saw the men in orange vests as a crane lifted them to the top of a tree. They cut off limbs and branches as they rose. Behind the roar of the chain-saws, Connor saw the tree-cutting machine creep forward. Although it was still at a distance, the machine was moving straight at the hawk's tree.

Connor looked up at the hawk's nest. The mother had gathered her children and stood perched over her nest. Her wings spread out, and she leaned forward in a threatening motion as if to strike. A fierce "KEY-eer" issued from her beak as she flapped her wings violently.

The crew of men moved slowly forward through the expanse of trees. It would only be a matter of time before they reached the hawk's nest. Connor figured it would take the machine a day at the most.

Connor paced back and forth in front of the tree. As he moved his little legs, he began to think more and more quickly, and as he thought he began to pace faster and faster. And then he stopped.

He did the first thing he had thought of: he ran. He ran as fast as his little legs could carry him. He dodged trees, jumped over logs, and ran through the tall grass, which whipped at his face. He ran through his backyard, up his street, and straight to Moriko's window. His little legs couldn't carry him any longer, and as he knocked hard on her window, he collapsed. Little Connor knelt as he waited, gasping for breath.

Moriko slid her window open and looked out. "Connor, are you alright?"

Connor took deep breaths of air. "The machine…"

"Connor, we already tried." Her voice sounded hopeless.

"…it's going for the hawk's nest."

Moriko grew quiet.

"I know we can't save the forest," Little Connor raised his head, trying to gather some dignity as he panted for breath, "but we can try to save the hawk."

The only sound that followed was Connor's breathing as it slowed. It was only a moment before Moriko jumped out the window. The next instant, the two were running off to the forest. Connor was struggling to stay on his feet, but he ran anyway. The two looked like deer, racing hard, trampling through the forest; but they felt more like wolves, fast and ferocious, hunting down their prey.

Pain shot through Connor's legs as he ran. His body grew numb, and he fought off the urge to collapse. But when he thought he couldn't go any further, he pushed himself to move faster, and when he thought he couldn't endure any more pain, he made himself run harder. Just as he thought he would collapse, he reached the tree. Moriko looked frantically through the trees. She saw a great ancient fall to the ground and spotted the machine right behind it. Connor rested his hands on his knees and pleaded desperately, "Moriko, we have to try and do something."

"I know," she snapped back. She gazed through the few trees that stood between them and the encroaching machine. "I'm thinking."

"Why don't we try moving the nest?" asked Connor. "We can just move it to a tree that's out of the way."

"That won't work, Connor. Look at the hawk." she pointed up to the bird, as it stood ready to strike anything that threatened her little ones. "She's too frightened and angry to know that we'd be trying to help her."

The two children paced back and forth as they tried to think of something, anything that could stop the machine. Connor thought of all kinds of things to try, but he knew none of them would work.

Moriko looked up the ancient oak. The mother hawk was perched on its branch staring fiercely at the encroaching destruction.

"Connor, I've got it!" Moriko exclaimed, jumping over to him. She flung her arms around little Connor and started dancing and swinging him around in circles. "I got it, Connor! We climb up the tree!"

"Climb up the tree?" Connor stopped dancing and looked up through its branches. His stomach turned as he thought about climbing upwards.

"Of course!" Moriko jumped up and down and danced some more.

"They can't cut down the tree if there are little kids in it, Connor!"

"I don't know…" Little Connor's voice trailed off. His hand rested on the trunk of the tree. He ran his fingers across the cracked surface of the bark. Moriko saw Connor's worried face, and she stopped dancing too.

Moriko's eyebrows furrowed as she thought. "You don't need to go up. We only need one of us up in the tree. Besides, you can stand down here and warn them."

He just nodded his head in reply. Connor wished more than anything that he could be brave like Moriko, brave like a wolf. Little Connor knew he wasn't a wolf.

Moriko wrapped her arms around Connor, and the two held each other tight, trying to squeeze the fear out of each other. When they parted, Moriko forced a weak grin. Little Connor replied with an uneasy smile of his own.

Moriko grabbed a low branch and began to make her way up the tree. She swung from that branch to pull herself up onto the next. The branches grew so dense in the middle that she practically walked around the tree like a spiral staircase.

Little Connor stared upwards as he watched Moriko climb higher and higher. He leaned his head back all the way to his shoulder, and little Moriko still climbed higher. She was almost to the top when she stopped and sat on a branch only a few feet below the hawk's nest. The mother hawk had been watching Moriko the entire time.

Moriko looked up at the hawk, and she gave a little smile to the bird. The bird flapped her feathers gently as she had when gathering her own little ones. The mother hawk and little Moriko perched on their branches, staring at the approaching menace.

The machine crawled forward. The noise of the machine and the chainsaws became deafening as they moved closer. Only a few trees stood between them and the hawk's nest. The crew of men ascended the last two trees with their cranes, cutting branches and limbs as they rose. Meanwhile, the machine tore apart another tree that stood in its path.

As branches and limbs fell between the two trees that sat in front of Connor, he started shouting as loud as he could over the buzzing saws and the roaring machine: "Stop!"

One of the men wielding a chainsaw looked down at little Connor standing in front of the tree. He waved to another man with a chainsaw, and the two looked down at Connor as he shouted for them to stop. The men couldn't hear the shouts of Connor so they merely shrugged.

The two men were about to continue with their cutting when they saw something that surprised them both. This tiny little boy on the ground to whom they had paid no attention to began to pull himself up onto a branch of the tree. The men turned off their chainsaws as they watched.

Little Connor stood on the lower branch. He wasn't very high above the ground, so he didn't feel particularly worried. He pulled himself up onto the next branch, and he wasn't much higher than before so he tried not to worry. Little Connor continued upwards like this, climbing from one branch to the next. Each time he climbed to the next branch, he was only a little bit higher than before.

Moriko looked down from her branch and cheered as she saw the tiny figure of Connor getting closer as he climbed higher and higher. She shouted and cheered him on as he ascended to each branch. Connor pulled himself up onto a branch that was almost too high for his little reach. He

managed to pull his stomach onto the branch, but his little legs dangled as his body curled around it.

He looked down through the dozens of branches between himself and the ground. Connor was already halfway up the tree, and he finally realized how high up he was. The branch pushing into his stomach wasn't making things any easier.

He slowly eased himself onto the branch, until he could rest his back against the tree and close his eyes. He breathed deeply as his heart raced and as his stomach twisted into tight knots. Now that Connor had stopped his ascent, he was too frightened to continue.

The two men with chainsaws had reached the foot of the tree, and the machine was rolling forward to the tree they had been working on. One of the men rushed over to the machine and waved at its driver. Within a moment, the roaring of the machine stopped, and the forest grew quiet.

Moriko looked down from her branch, her hand resting on the ancient tree. "Connor, you're doing good! You only have a few more feet to go." The few branches that stood between her and Connor would be an easy climb. They were so close to each other that she had walked on them like stairs. But to get to that point, Connor would have to swing himself across a particularly large gap, a gap that had been nearly too large even for Moriko.

"Come on, Connor!" Moriko kept shouting in encouragement. "I know you can do it, Connor. I know you are brave."

Little Connor opened his eyes and peered over to the next branch, and he thought to himself, Moriko may think I can do it, but I know that I cannot. He looked back to the branch he was at before. The step down looked almost as scary as the leap upward. But the step down would take me closer to the ground, he thought.

"I can't do it." Connor cried as he peeked down below.

"Yes, you can! Be brave, Connor."

"But I can't. I'm not brave, Moriko. I'm not like Astor." Connor yelled as he balanced himself on the branch.

"You don't need to pretend to be a warrior, Connor." Moriko shouted, "You are one!"

Connor closed his eyes and took a deep breath. High above him, the mother hawk screeched. His eyes bolted open. He belted out a cry. And little Connor swung.

His tiny hands caught a hold of the next branch, and he pulled with all the might that his little arms could manage. He swung one leg up onto the branch, slipped it over, and rested his body against the wood.

A big smile spread across little Connor's face. Moriko cheered above him, laughing and shouting with glee. Te mother hawk beat her wings in the excitement.

As little Connor lay on the outstretched branch, he heard Moriko fall silent. A gentle wind blew through the branches of the tree, and Connor lifted his head from the bark. His little eyes grew wide. Amid the excitement, a single feather from the mother hawk had fallen from her tail, blown in the breeze, and landed on Connor's branch.

Connor held the feather tightly in his little fist as he nearly jumped from one branch to the next to reach Moriko. As he climbed the final branches, the winds grew stronger, rustling the leaves of the ancient oak tree.

The machine and the crew of men had grown silent, and the wind blew through the forest until the rustling of the trees was deafening. Connor pulled himself up beside Moriko, and she exclaimed as she hugged him, "You got your feather!"

Connor looked down at the machine and the chainsaws and the stretch of tree stumps that lay behind them. “The feather was never what really mattered.”

Moriko untied the small pouch that was tied to the front of her shorts. Connor looked on curiously as she opened it. Moriko poured its contents into her hands and spat into the soot. She rubbed the mixture of spit and ashes until her palms were black. With one hand, she marked her face. Ten she ran a line down Connor’s face: “War paint for the battle ahead.”

The machine roared again and its saws cut through the ancient pines that stood before the grove of oaks. The slight breeze that had been blowing had built to a strong wind. As it blew through the forest, the rustling leaves became deafening as if in an attempt to match the roar of the machine.

As the tree before the children fell, the two little ones joined the battle cries of the forest. Te trees swayed and shook. The hawk beat her wings and screeched along with its little ones. Moriko let out a ferocious wolf howl, and Connor emitted a fierce “KEY-eer!”

Suddenly, the machine squealed to a halt. Its saws stopped buzzing and its engine grew quiet. The men around the machine stood and looked up at the tree. The wind continued to blow, but the cries of the forest quieted as one particularly stubby man walked forward.

The stubby man pulled back his hardhat and ran his hands along his belt line, just under his potbelly. “You kids need to get down from there,” he yelled up. “We need to cut this tree down.”

“No!” Te two children shouted back.

“We need to cut this tree down, and it’s going to be quite dangerous to do with two kids in the tree.” The man squinted his eyes as he continued to look up. “You all don’t want to get hurt, do ya?”

The children shook their heads. Moriko yelled back, “Sorry, mister. We’re not coming down.”

The stubby man grew angry. His face turned red and he hollered up, “You two get down here this instant!”

The two little ones couldn’t help but laugh at the man’s red face.

“Sorry, sir,” Connor replied with a snicker, “we can’t let you cut down this tree with this hawk’s nest up here.”

Some of the men below began to laugh with the children. The little stubby man grew furious. He took his orange helmet and threw it at the ground. “You kids get down here right now or I’ll…I’ll cut it down with you in it!”

The children stopped laughing. Would he really cut the tree down with them in it? They looked at each other with a bit of worry in their little eyes. Connor looked down at the angry, stubby man and shook his head. “We’re not coming down. You’re going to have to cut it down with us in it.”

The stubby man swore as he stomped to his vehicle. The engine sputtered as it started and then roared as it rolled slowly forward. The children looked at each other and back to the machine as the saws hissed and then started buzzing. As the machine approached the ancient tree, two little hands found themselves together. Each clung more tightly to the other every inch the monstrous machine advanced.

The buzzing saws were only a foot away from the trunk of the tree. The two children squeezed each other’s hands tight, but they did not waver. Te machine inched towards the tree. Just as it was about to cut into the trunk, the saws stopped spinning and the machine backed away.

The children cheered as the machine retreated, and the two laughed as the angry man jumped out of the machine. The children sat in the tree, swinging their legs and blowing raspberries at the men while the stubby man tried to figure out how to get them down.

The stubby man finally threw his hands up in the air and called his supervisor. It was only a few minutes before a pickup truck pulled up, and a man with glasses almost as big as his cowboy hat stepped out. He eyed up the children in the tree, and the two little ones waved down at him.

He turned to the stubby man. “This is the big problem that you called me about? A couple of little kids up in a tree?”

The stubby man grew red again as he tried to explain everything he had done and how the kids insisted on staying up in the tree.

“They’re even sitting there smiling!” he shouted, nearly out of breath.

The man with the cowboy hat put his hands on his hips. The stubby man asked, “Should we just call the police?”

“No, no!” Te supervisor replied. “And give the media more fuel against us? ‘Two cute kids take on big mean construction corporation.’ No.” Te supervisor adjusted the brim of his big sunglasses.

“We’ll just have wait them out.”

“Overnight?” Te stubby little man asked. “Should we leave some- one to watch over the work-site, so they don’t cause any more trouble?”

The supervisor shook his head. “Tey’re just kids. Besides, it’ll be scarier out here alone.”

So the workers jumped into their trucks and the lot of them drove away, leaving the worksite as it had been. The two little ones sat up in the tree cheering at their small victory.

“Connor, we did it! We stopped them.” Little Moriko wrapped her arms around Connor.

He smiled as he hugged her, but then added reluctantly, “But they’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Then we stay up through the night.”

“And what about food?” Little Connor asked.

Moriko shrugged. “It’ll only be one night.”

“But then what about the next day?”

Moriko sighed. “We’ll figure something out. For now, let’s celebrate!”

The children sat in the tree as the sun fell beneath the canopy of the forest. They passed their time singing songs and telling stories to one another. As the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, the two little ones began to notice the grumbling in their tummies. As their tummies grumbled, their eyes grew heavy. And as their eyes grew heavy, their bottoms became sore.

The two realized that remaining in the tree was going to be more uncomfortable than they had thought. But with hungry bellies, sleepy eyes, and sore bottoms, they stayed put.

The children devised a system according to which they would take turns, one of them sleeping while the other stayed awake on guard duty. Connor was to sleep first, and Moriko to take first watch.

Connor leaned up against the tree and closed his eyes. Within a few moments, he was asleep. Moriko looked at Connor and yawned. She began kicking her feet in an attempt to stay awake. She wiggled her toes and counted numbers, but her eyes fluttered. Slowly, she rested her head on Connor and drifed off to sleep.

When Moriko finally opened her eyes, it felt like she had only slept for a few minutes. In fact, the sun had set long ago and it was already well into the middle of the night. As the wind whistled through the leaves, the branches swayed, carrying the children with them. But instead of being frightened, Moriko felt comforted rocking in the arms of the great tree.

The forest was absolutely silent except for a noise in the distance. There was a slight rustling in the forest, so slight it could have been a small animal or perhaps just the wind. As Moriko looked out across the forest, it was as if it had become alive with swaying branches and rustling leaves. A small fox darted across the site. It stopped to survey the scene before racing back into the safety of the forest.

Suddenly, dark figures began to emerge near the edge of the clearing. Moriko nudged Connor awake as she watched the figures crouching among the trees. Connor rubbed his sleepy eyes and looked in the direction Moriko pointed.

"What do you think it is?" Connor tried to whisper as quietly as he could.

Moriko shrugged before slowly lowering herself from the branch. She edged along the lower branch to get a closer look at the figures. Connor slid down to that branch and scooted up next to Moriko. The figures began to creep towards the clearing. Ten, one by one, they emerged from the woods and moved swifly across the barren ground. Despite the moon's bright light, they remained shrouded in the forest's shadow.

Moriko turned to Connor and whispered excitedly, "It's the elves!" Connor watched the black-clad elves as they fanned out across the worksite as they had before. He lowered himself from one branch to another, and Moriko followed quickly behind him as he worked his way down the tree. But no matter how excited they were, the children were careful to move quietly.

The children reached a branch that was about twice their height off the ground. They both crawled along the limb until they could peek their heads through the tree's big leaves.

The pack of elves quickly rummaged through the site. Chainsaws were being disassembled and the pieces broken. Another elf worked underneath the monstrous machine. Like last time, the last elf stood guard, watching into the night.

The children's eyes darted across the clearing as they watched each elf work quickly and quietly. They scanned the worksite until they met the eyes of the elf acting as lookout.

When their tiny eyes met the elf 's, they froze in place, not daring to move and risk scaring all the elves away. The watch elf casually walked around the worksite to each of the other elves. The elf whispered in all of their ears before strolling calmly across the clearing.

The children looked at each other with wide, excited eyes. The elf was walking right towards them! The elf stopped in front of the tree, and their eyes met again.

"Hello, little ones." The elf 's voice was a soft whisper. "What are you two doing up there?"

Little Moriko replied matter-of-factly, "We're protecting the forest from the machines!"

Under the elf 's mask, her lips curled into a smile. "Good. We're doing the same."

"Sorry we scared you away last time," Connor apologized quietly.

"That was you two? Oh my." Te elf couldn't help but giggle a little.

"It's quite all right, little ones."

"We tried to help anyway," Moriko stated as she leaned forward to whisper even quieter. "We broke the machine to try and stop it. And when that didn't work, we climbed up in this tree to protect it."

"There's a hawk's nest up there." Connor pointed up to the nest hidden in the branches. "We stayed in this tree all day so the machines wouldn't cut it down, and we'll stay in it all night too, as long as we have to protect it."

"That's very brave of you," The elf whispered. "It sounds like the two of you have made little elves of yourselves."

Moriko and Connor shot big grins at each other. The elf looked back at the clearing. The other elves were nearly finished with their work. “You two should get down for a while. It’s not going to be safe by the machine in a little bit.”

“But what about the hawk?” Connor asked anxiously.

“She should be fine, little one. She chose a good tree to nest in.”

The elf ran her hand across the cracked bark of the elder tree. “We’re going to make sure this machine never destroys another forest.”

The two children looked at each other questioningly until the elf offered, “You two can come with us for a little bit.”

The children smiled and swung down from the branch. The elf guided them to the edge of the forest, then hooted softly. Te other elves caught her signal and hurried to finish.

The children crouched in a bush next to the watch elf. The other elves slowly began to assemble there, too. Then the watch elf sent two of the elves running through the forest, and the rest scattered among the trees and bushes.

Two elves helped Connor and Moriko climb onto a tree branch, and the watch elf whispered, “Watch the machine.”

At first, the children sat and stared at the machine sitting in the darkness of the night. Then, a spark burst from underneath it. The tiny flash of light died quickly, but slowly, a small flame began to burn. It started out small, but soon the flames spread beneath the machine until the whole underside was burning.

There was a burst that sounded like thunder, and the front of the machine was engulfed in fire. It spread across its body and consumed its menacing claws. It wasn’t long before the entire machine had become a pyre burning in the moon’s light.

Little Moriko, filled with excitement, let out a howl. Connor joined in and soon all the elves were howling to the moon and singing to the forest.

Then one by one, the elves turned and disappeared into the darkness. The last elf turned to Moriko and Connor. She said no words to them, and they said none to her. She hugged them both tightly and kissed each of them on the forehead, and then she was gone.

Moriko and Connor sat silently in the night. With their arms around each other, the two gazed into the light of the burning machine, smiles shining on their faces.

The next morning, the men in orange vests found their worksite in ruins. Black smoke billowed from the smoldering remains of the machine. Broken parts of the chainsaws lay scattered across the clearing. Some men were silent; others kicked angrily at the pieces—and a few grinned at the thought of a few days free from work.

The supervisor rolled up in his truck. His face was red with fury as he yelled at the men who gathered around him in a circle. One of the workers indicated something on the ground, and the supervisor looked where the man was pointing. He stood silent for a moment before throwing his big cowboy hat to the ground.

The supervisor, and then the police, tried asking the children what happened, but the two just shrugged and said, “How would we know anything? We’re just kids.”

Eventually, the scene quieted down and the men left. Little Connor and Moriko climbed up high into the tree and looked down at the ground where the men had .gathered. Marked into the caked ground in big, bold letters were the words:

KEEP DESTROYING OUR FORESTS
AND THE ELFs WILL STRIKE BACK!

4

The children walked through the worksite. A pair of feet walked in each of the giant prints of a machine's treads. One little hand held the other, bridging the space between.

As the two walked, little sprouts of grass peeked through the caked mud. The two continued to walk, and as they did, they grew older. And as they grew, so did the grass. They walked in the treads as wild-flowers opened and bloomed around them.

In the background, giant electric lines had been constructed, cutting across the forest. In the sky, a mother hawk flew above the tops of trees. Her little ones flew behind her, flapping their little wings, landing on her back and then flying through the sky.

The two little ones stopped in their paths and looked at one another. Now they were not so little. Connor smiled at Moriko, who looked beautiful with a hawk feather holding back her hair. She nodded her head towards the ground.

Connor knelt in the spot where he had collapsed and cried years ago. Now, wildflowers bloomed where he ran his hands across land that had once been barren. In the place where his first teardrop had fallen, a small sapling was on its way to becoming an oak. Connor stood up and grabbed hold of Moriko's hand. As the two continued on their way, one whispered, "There's a time to cry, and a time to fight back."

The mother hawk let out a fierce screech as thunder echoed through the valley. With a flash like lightning, flames sprang up to engulf the electric pylons, and they collapsed to the ground one afer another.

As for the two little ones, they kept walking and never looked back.

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