

*Hello. My name is Rachel Willman. About a year ago, my friends and I decided to explore Caster Woods. We came across pure evil -- and he was set to take over the world. The entire Earth and everything on it is in danger. You are the only one who can help. This is my story.*

“Are you sure about this?” My friend Miri asked. We were standing on the worn trail outside Caster Woods. The trees stretched high, blocking our view of what might be inside.

“Sure I’m sure,” I replied, trying to keep my voice from shaking. In the past three years, fourteen people had entered the woods, never to be seen again. Our expedition was my friend Riley’s idea. Scared of nothing, she was already pointing her flashlight at the entrance to the woods, examining the path ahead.

Without stopping her work, she said, “Have you seen Amanda and Kate? They should be here by now.”

Giggling slightly, Miri replied, “They’re not here yet.” She winked at Kate and Amanda, who had just arrived.

“They’re STILL not here? Do me a favor and yell at them for me when they arrive.”

“Fine,” Miri said. Miri and I each took a deep breath and yelled at the top of our lungs, “WHY WEREN’T YOU HERE EARLIER, WE NEED TO GET GOING, WE MIGHT HAVE TO WALK IN THE DARK BECAUSE OF YOU!”

Riley turned around in time to see the rest of her team collapse on the ground, giggling uncontrollably. I stood up quickly, brushing dirt and dust off my clothes.

“We should get going,” I said.

“Thank you, Rachel,” Riley said, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The woods were quiet, almost too quiet. The air was saturated with water vapor. We crept along the path, shining our flashlights on the trees surrounding us. Was it my imagination or...

“Riley, are the trees getting closer?” Miri asked.

“Nonsense,” Riley said, “It’s just your eyes playing tricks on you.”

“I’m scared,” Kate whispered to me. She slipped her small hand into my larger one. Kate is Amanda’s younger sister, only eight years old, but she’s pretty cool. Her thin, brown hair is always in two braids, each one threaded with five big clay beads. Her eyes, which are the never-ending blue of a summer sky, were squinted with worry. Ahead of us, Riley stopped suddenly, causing a pile-up. Amanda, Kate and I stopped in time, but Miri wasn’t so lucky. She walked into me, and we both tumbled to the ground. I sat up, shoving my glasses back up my nose and pushing my frizzy black hair out of my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Amanda asked, helping me up.

“I think so,” I replied. Miri got to her feet, looking sheepish.

“Sorry Rachel,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said, “Come on. We’re wasting time.”

“Agreed,” Riley said, “We need to explore every inch of these woods to show people that there’s nothing to be afraid of.” That was exactly how she had gotten us to come with her on this crazy expedition in the first place. She told us that there was nothing dangerous in here, and that was that. Nobody EVER argues with Riley. Not this time, though.

“We should go back,” Amanda said. Riley opened her mouth to speak, but Amanda cut her off.

“Protest all you want. I’m going. If anyone else wants to come, they can.”

She turned to go, followed by Miri, but there was nowhere to run. The way we had come was filled with menacing trees, and more were springing up out of the ground, forcing us to back up. Suddenly, a hole appeared in the ground in front of our feet, stretching towards us. We started to run. The hole was gaining on us, so we started to run faster, but Miri and Amanda were too close. Time slowed down. I watched in horror as Miri was sucked into the

hole, leaving nothing but a lingering scream. In a matter of seconds, Amanda would be taken as well, unless someone did something. I held out my hand to Amanda, but she didn't notice. My heart was thumping so loudly that I couldn't even hear Amanda screaming. I held out my hand again, wiggling it this time. Amanda noticed, and she held on tight. Kate and Riley grabbed my other hand, and we all pulled Amanda away from the oncoming hole. Riley reached into her bag and pulled out a block of something. She tossed it into the hole. It stopped growing, and then it shrank, until all that was left was a crack in the ground. The trees had stopped advancing as well. Amanda took a shaky breath.

"W-what was that?" she asked.

"You mean that block that saved our lives?" Riley said, "That was clay. Nothing more, nothing less."

"But what about Miri?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I think we should keep moving," Riley sounded unsure, as if doubting her plan for the first time, "Come on."

As we walked farther into the woods, the darkness seemed to grow darker, until it was pressing against my eyes like a blindfold. On Riley's orders, we switched our flashlights onto the highest setting. The darkness around us lessened, allowing us to continue our expedition. We walked for an uneventful ten minutes. It seemed to me that the woods were trying to lull us into a false sense of security, trying to get us to lower our defenses. Even the wind was silent. Suddenly, we saw light through the trees. Switching our flashlights off, we ran towards the blindingly bright light, tripping over roots and stumps. We emerged from the darkness of the woods to find a bright clearing...

And a trap.

As soon as we entered the clearing, men jumped out of the bushes and grabbed us. The tallest of them ordered the others to step back. He snapped once, and cages sprang up around

Kate, Riley, Amanda, and me. He snapped again, and ropes dropped down from the trees above us. They ensnared our cages, and they lifted us into the air.

“What do we have here?” the man asked, “Mere children? Oh well. They must be of good stock; after all, they did escape the hole.” He walked around below us, sizing us up, and said, “I think you will do.”

His voice was silky and horrible, but his eyes were even worse.

They were gold, with the smallest pupils imaginable. They gave me the feeling that he could see every thought racing through my head. They have given me night-meres every night for the past year.

“Marc, please handle prisoner identification,” the man said, turning away from me towards a gruff, unshaven man, the shortest in the group.

“Alright, Maxwell, I’m on it,” he grunted.

“You there,” Marc said, pointing to Riley, “What’s your name, and how old are you?”

“Why should I tell you?” That Riley’s a fighter. She doesn’t give in easily.

“Let’s just say it’s in your best interests to comply.”

Riley made a show of pretending to zip her lips and throw away the key.

“Fine!” Marc said, “But I’m coming back to you.” Riley shrugged, and Marc pointed to Amanda.

“Name,” grunted Marc.

“Aman...um... I mean... I’m... Clara... Clara Barton! ”

“Okay. Age?”

“Thirteen.”

Marc wrote something down, probably what Amanda had just told him, and he pointed to me.

“Betsy Ross, age twelve,” I said, following Amanda’s example.

Marc pointed to Kate. I looked at her, hoping that she wouldn’t give her real name. She didn’t.

“Cinderella!” Kate exclaimed.

Marc eyed her suspiciously.

“Um... Cinderella’s my real name, but my friends call me Pocahontas.”

Maxwell entered the clearing. I had been so caught up in what was happening that I didn’t notice him leave. Marc handed him the sheet of paper with our info on it.

“Marc, how many girls are there?” Maxwell asked.

“There are four girls, Maxwell.”

“If there are four girls,” Maxwell said, “Then why are there only three names?”

“The first girl was unwilling to share her information with me.”

“Very well. Men, move her in with the other prisoner.”

Four men scaled the tree where Riley’s cage was hanging and lowered it to the ground. One of them opened the door and grabbed Riley. She bit him. The man let her go, and she scampered to the top of a different tree. Two men climbed the tree and grabbed her, this time stuffing a rag in her mouth as they did so. They brought her down as two other men pushed a cage with several snakes in it out into the clearing. A person was huddled in the corner, her eyes wide. With a jolt, I realized it was Miri. Maxwell opened the cage door, and Riley was shoved inside with Miri.

Riley pulled the rag back out of her mouth, shouting, “Let me out!”

“You’re not coming out until you tell us your name and age,” Maxwell said, “And I wouldn’t shout, if I were you. Those snakes are scared of loud noises.”

Riley grew silent. The only thing she is really afraid of is snakes. How did they know? On the other hand, Miri spoke up. I guess she’d been with the snakes long enough.

“I’m Miri Solomon, age eleven,” said Miri, and we could only hope that her giving her real name wouldn’t land us in more trouble than we were already in.

“Well done, Miri Solomon,” Maxwell said, “Men, move her out.”

The men grabbed Miri and put her in Riley’s old cage. Riley took a deep breath. I could tell that those snakes were really freaking her out.

Riley said, “I’m Susan B. Anthony, age thirteen, and I’m gonna kick your ...”

“That’s nice,” Maxwell interrupted. “Men, remove the snakes and hang the cage. And you, little girls, you will become warriors as our mother marches to war!”

He waited, obviously expecting a big reaction. We just looked at each other.

He tried again, “And you will become warriors as our mother marches to war!”

“War with whom?” Kate asked, “And who’s your mother?”

“War with the world!” Maxwell answered, “And why don’t I introduce you to my mom.”

He moved to the edge of the clearing. A giant hole opened up in the ground, the same one that had taken Miri, except this time, the tops of two rocks slid back, revealing two solid gold eyes. A roar issued from the hole.

“My mother is pleased,” Maxwell said, “She says you are of good stock, as I thought. She can see everything that is in the earth or that comes from the earth.”

“But who IS she?” I asked.

“My mother, your mother, everyone and everything’s mother, Mother Earth!”

“Um,” I said, “That’s nice.” Another roar came from the hole.

“My mother finds you amusing, but this is no time for jokes. She will merge with me soon, and we will attack the world,” Maxwell said, as he started to sink into the ground, “See you soon!” The ground rumbled, and the trees shook. I held onto the bars of my cage to keep myself from bouncing around. We waited for about thirty minutes. Finally, the shaking ceased, and the ground opened up. Maxwell rose out of the ground, but something was different. Maxwell’s eyes, which were dull gold when he entered the ground, were now glowing, but it was with a harsh, cold light. Maxwell looked at me, and I saw that his pupils had disappeared. Freaky.

“My children, assist me!” He said in a voice that wasn’t quite his own. It was rough and scratchy, like he had had a cold for a week or two. Trees and rocks sprang to life and gathered around him.

“Men, ready the prisoners, and don’t forget to plug their noses.” Maxwell said. The men pulled us out of our cages and held us so we couldn’t escape. Then they put things in our noses that made it so we couldn’t breathe through them.

“And now!” Maxwell said in his new rumbly voice, “Clara Barton, Pocahontas, Miri Solomon, Betsy Ross and Susan Anthony...”

“B.” I heard Riley mutter.

“...prepare to join our troops! Men, here are the spheres.” He walked around giving each man a little brown sphere and making sure our noses were properly plugged. The men held the spheres over our mouths. I was confused. Why were they doing this? Then, Miri opened her mouth to breath, and the men put a sphere in her mouth. She went limp immediately. That was when I started to understand what they were doing. They needed us to open our mouths so they could put the brown spheres in our mouths. I decided that I wasn’t going to let that happen to me until I knew what they were. I took a deep breath, careful not to open my mouth very much.

“What are those spheres you are giving us?” I asked as sweetly as I could, given the circumstance.

Maxwell turned towards me and said, “These spheres are pieces of my original form. I have complete control over anyone who eats one. Like this.” He jerked his arm up, and Miri stood. He made her turn towards me, and I saw that her eyes were dull and unseeing. Kate gasped, and she became part of his army, too. That’s when I saw what I needed to do.

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” I said.

“I don’t?”

“No, you don’t.” I looked at my friends, hoping they would understand.

“All we want is to work for you. We are completely loyal.” I tried to block every un-loyal thought I had, in case he could read my thoughts. Thankfully, Amanda and Riley were nodding.

“You are telling the truth.” It was not a question. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Men, and girls, clear the camp and prepare the donkeys,” Maxwell said. We did as he said, and we set out on the toughest journey of our lives.

*We walked halfway around the world, Maxwell providing us with muddy land bridges. My friends and I worked as servants for Maxwell and his men. We cooked food, washed clothes, and hauled drinking water. The other day, Amanda got hold of some pencils and paper. The men are out fighting right now, so I have some time. With each new day, Maxwell grows stronger. My fear is that he will soon be unstoppable. I write this in hope that you will send us help, lots of help. I have enclosed an amulet that Riley snatched from Maxwell’s tent. It will guide you to us, wherever we are. If you are reading this, go to the Caster Woods. The amulet will guide you from there. Once you have read this, take action. You are the only one who can stop this. I wish you luck for all our sakes.*

Sincerely,

Rachel Willman