

Fresh Fruit

They didn't believe him at first. Neither one had seen Sam in hours, and when he appeared to them back where he'd gone missing from the trail and told them what he'd discovered--it seemed too strange to be true. It couldn't have been. It was actually *impossible*. And yet, there he was, standing in front of them, perfectly upright, never even *flinching* as he reached into his pocket, withdrew a folded knife, and raised it to his own neck. Before either could stop him by convincing him his delusions of invulnerability were untrue, he slashed his throat in one quick, decisive motion.

The cut was deep, so deep that they worried his head may loll too far to one side, snap off, and roll to a stop at their feet. But it remained attached, despite the amount of flesh that had been torn away. He stayed standing and smiling, giddy as he watched the horror fill their faces. They screamed, and Jeanette turned to run for help, for anyone that could possibly be out there with them whose phone actually had service in the middle of nowhere, but he grabbed her wrist and held her there with a grip that was startlingly strong for someone who must be drowning in their own blood.

Blood came, but then it stopped, and the hole that had once been gaping near his trachea squirmed and swelled until it was only the thin line of a faded scar. And then, finally, nothing remained as evidence of what should have meant his death.

"This can't be real," Maggie had said. She had watched with wary features and a cynical distaste as he cleaned the blade on his now blood-drenched hoodie. "That's not funny."

"It's not a joke," he replied. "Couldn't you tell?"

Maggie's eyes deepened with concern, but Jeanette's brightened with a morbid curiosity.

"Did you just heal yourself? How did you do that?" she asked as she ran to him, inspecting his throat and the knife. The blade drew blood as soon as it touched her finger, even sharper than she'd imagined.

"I can't hurt myself anymore," Sam replied with a shrug. "I don't think I can even die. I was walking in the woods and then suddenly I was falling through the air. I fell for a long time, and when I hit the ground, it didn't even hurt."

"That's incredible," Jeanette breathed. "What do you mean? Where did you go? Why did you leave?"

“I was just walking, and I heard something out in the trees...” He trailed off as he tried to recall. Eventually, he seemed to remember something, and his smile returned. “I found an old, dead tree, but it still had some weird fruit growing on it. I was starving, and it looked... delicious. So I reached out to grab it. Then nothing. I just woke up back here. Cut my arm open on a branch and saw the wound close right in front of me.”

“You’re an idiot,” Maggie chided, some of her usual playfulness finally forcing its way through her unease. “And it did this to you? You need to go to a hospital or the police or... something.”

“I’ve never felt better than I do now,” he replied, shaking his head with a shrug. “I can show you the tree. Help me make sure it’s real and not just a hallucination from eating strange plants?”

“Shouldn’t we tell someone about it?” Jeanette asked, crossing her arms and looking down the trail. “As much as I want cool powers like you... Maybe we should leave.”

“We can’t do that,” he countered hastily. His reaction made Jeanette tense, and it seemed to disturb Maggie as well, though she didn’t voice her concerns. Sam looked embarrassed and then tried to reason with them, apologetically. “We don’t even know it’s real yet, and I can’t leave until I know for sure. Don’t you want to know?” He walked backward off the trail and tilted his head toward the dense thicket of trees in invitation. “Come on. It wasn’t far.”

It didn’t take long to convince them; the allure of the mystery would be difficult for anyone to refuse. They knew they were miles from either end of the trail, and turning back then would have meant possibly losing their chance to find this secluded phenomenon and gain this power for themselves. Yes, it drew them to it, despite the warnings of the little voices in their minds they usually heeded. The voices screamed and their nerves were alight, minds on edge, jaws set, and the hair on their arms and the backs of their necks standing on end. But none of this managed to dissuade them. They, too, heard the noise as their feet lifted from the path, and it drew closer and closer.

When the tree actually came into sight, they never stopped to inspect it or question its existence. It felt like they were floating, and maybe they were; they didn’t see their feet or the autumn-leaf-covered forest floor below them. The leaves and twigs crunching and breaking underfoot hardly made a sound. They saw the towering tree and the tree only. Its gnarled ash-gray branches held a singular red fruit, fleshy and emitting a sickly-sweet smell that lingered in the air around them like ghoulish hands pulling them forward. They could almost feel the jagged fingernails of the hands sinking into their skin, but if it was unpleasant, they didn’t seem to mind. It was like the journey of a dream where the walking is made easy, and even though you have no destination in mind, you somehow manage to arrive. They didn’t notice Sam stop walking behind them at the

edge of the clearing, and all senses seemed to dull and fade away except for the pheromonic scent and melodic hum that called out to them.

They both approached the tree with greedy hands, outstretched and ready to receive the fruit. But they collided and fumbled, both falling out of their haze long enough to look down and find themselves at the edge of a precipice--a steep, narrow ravine that seemed to appear out of nowhere--hidden there behind the grass and colorful flowers and unseen while staring up at the tree's high branches. Jeanette held out a shaky arm to stop both of them from falling in. At the bottom of the rocky pit lay a pile of decaying corpses, some old and weathered bone, and some newer with half-torn flesh, matted hair, and mouths agape in silenced terror. All were pitifully broken and so far down that hope even one among them may still be breathing was nonexistent. And then their eyes were drawn to the very top, to the freshest corpse of them all, with its eyelids frozen open, its eyes vacant and glazed over, its mouth filled with drying blood and fallen dirt, and its face telling them that the thing standing behind them was not their childhood friend, Sam; it was simply wearing his skin.

They turn back, to run as far and as fast as they can, but the creature parading itself as Sam stood right behind them. No longer did it even attempt to appear alive, or even friendly, as it once had. It was certainly not Sam, but Sam's face is the one that eyed them up and down and gave a grin so wide that it tore into the flesh at the edges of its mouth.

"Go on," it growled with bared teeth and something that could almost be mistaken for a voice.
"Take a bite."