

The War Machine

By Grace Jumper, North Carolina

The Machine came to the carefully hidden door of her secluded cabin in the woods in the form of an injured soldier boy.

On a brisk spring morning, she woke before dawn, as she always did. Everything was quiet, except for the occasional trill of an early bird or the rustle of some small creature in the woods. Savoring the peace, she grabbed a wooden bucket from its hook on the wall to draw water for her morning herbal tea. When she opened the door to go to the well, she gasped in shock.

There was a bloody boy on her doorstep. "Help me," he begged. "Please help me."

Reflexively, she almost slammed the door and ran to sound the alarm for the forest's inhabitants. The boy wore the gray soldier's uniform of the Machine, that terrible thing that she and her fellow forest folk had hidden from for over two generations. She should never consider inviting it inside her refuge.

This boy wasn't the Machine, though. Looking at him, bloodied and torn, she saw only a casualty of it. Rousing the forest would be unnecessary. She helped him inside and laid him on her table, the huge oaken one her grandfather had made for her parents before the Machine took them in the Spring Uprising of '28, over 20 years ago. She began gathering the herbs, roots, and other remedies she would need. "How did you get here?" she asked, suddenly realizing that her sanctuary could be compromised.

"Animal trail," he managed. "Never would've seen it if I wasn't crawling."

His recovery took days. She woke earlier than usual every morning to take care of her chores and forage herbs for his healing. As she treated him, she couldn't help but notice the marks of the Machine on him, branding him as a foreigner to the forest. He had the lean-yet-muscular form of a soldier, and at the nape of his neck she could see the bleeding, festering area where his identification tattoo had been. He must have dug out his identifying code chip.

The Machine instituted a code system in '23, claiming commerce and identification would be easier without the use of repetitive and confusing personal names. The foresters knew that the chips also gave the Machine unlimited access to their location. Now that the chip was gone, she didn't have to worry about being found.

Even though she had been treating the boy's injuries, they became infected, and fever took him. He raged and sweated for days, struggling, and murmuring in a restless haze. Occasionally, his babble became tortured cries. What scared her was when she could make out words—words about monsters, and wars, and about comrades lost. She had to grit her teeth, having no choice but to listen as she sought to combat the infection and fever.

Ten days after the soldier had shown up on her doorstep, summer dawned. She woke the morning of the solstice to find him awake, with his fever gone. "Good morning," she said.

"Where am I?"

"In the forest," she answered carefully. "You're safe now."

He sank back, too weak to respond. His eyes darted to the windows and doors; clearly, he didn't *feel* safe. She didn't know how to counter his fears, so she decided to let the forest do it for her.

Once the boy could walk, she helped him outside to let the forest lift his spirits. He was on edge at first, but before long he was smiling at the sound of birdsong and pointing out the healing herbs she had taught him.

With time, he no longer wore the Machine's influence like a scar. He grew enamored of the forest, and on warm nights they climbed the tallest trees to watch the stars appear in the sky. One such night, she broke the tranquility of stargazing to finally ask the question that had been begging for an answer. "What happened to you? How did you become separated from your regiment?"

His expression darkened. "They declared war on the forest savages in the foothills up north." He faltered. "I was drafted against my will. On our march through the woods, we were ambushed. It wasn't a large party and we managed to defeat them, but then..." He closed his eyes and shuddered violently. "Then the monsters came."

"Monsters?" she frowned. "There's no such thing."

"There were." His words came out slower and slower, as if he were speaking through quicksand. She could see the torment in his eyes. She wanted to tell him to hush, to forget the terrors he had seen, but the overwhelming need to know silenced her. "They came out of nowhere, unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was a slaughter. I only survived because I hid after being wounded in the first attack. Like I said, I couldn't have found the trail to your cabin if I wasn't crawling."

Neither of them spoke until they were inside again.

"I need to go back," said the soldier boy.

"Go back? To fight monsters? You're not in any condition for that."

He shook his head. "I need to see if anyone survived. Maybe some of my friends are still there. It's my duty."

She knew she couldn't let him go by himself. He didn't know the forest; it would be too easy for him to fall prey to wild animals or to get lost.

The next day, she packed bundles for each of them and they set out to find the site of the skirmish.

It was less than a half-day's walk to the battlefield. Amidst the deep green shadows of the trees, she could smell the blood and rot on the breeze, layered with a stench like animal musk. She gagged, and the soldier boy looked pale. "That's what they smelled like," he whispered.

The pair dropped onto all fours and crept into the underbrush, moving with the slow stealth of wild animals over dead leaves and twigs. Eventually, they reached a point where the repulsive reek was overwhelming. A thin screen of foliage provided them with cover, but also allowed a view of the battlefield.

Bodies were everywhere, mutilated in ways that could only be done by some sort of animal. The amount of butchery was on a scale that she had never seen in the natural world; it more resembled an abattoir.

She was about to step onto the battlefield when she heard a rumbling growl. Behind her, the soldier boy froze as something stood from where it had been lying amidst the bloodbath, hidden among the bodies.

It was built low to the ground and longer than any animal she had ever seen, with a mangy black pelt that revealed putrefying skin in patches, but that wasn't what was most disturbing about it. It was too *irregular*. Its body parts were out of place. It had four legs like most mammals, but they were slightly different lengths and weren't quite in the right places. Numerous eyes were positioned slap-dash across its bloodstained face, and when it yawned, she saw row upon row of serrated teeth crammed against each other.

More of the monsters rose out of the ground until there were more than a dozen of them. They ranged through the battlefield, devouring the remaining flesh of the dead with sickening gluttony.

These were not the sort of predators that she would expect in the woods; the soldier boy was right. These were monsters, unnatural, like nothing she could even imagine.

She turned to whisper that they should go back, but the boy's eyes were widening. She turned back to the scene and gasped.

The creatures were now standing on their hind legs, shaking their bodies. Their disgusting hides fell away, changing them from monsters to men. They wore uniforms of gray, blue, gold, and silver, resplendent with medals and ribbons and braids and other decorations. Everything about them was natural, except that they were bloated from gorging on the slaughter and had blood crusted around their mouths.

The men cast their gazes over the battlefield and, to her utter surprise, began to wail. "Oh, the horrors!" they keened. "Oh, the ugliness of the enemy! How dare we let them get away with this! We must not let them! We must not let them destroy any more of our youth! To war! To war!"

They wailed for a few more moments before trailing off and grinning at each other with sick, dishonest smiles. Then they wiped their mouths and mounted the horses that awaited them, riding off without a backwards glance at the bloodshed.

"What were those?" she asked once the creatures were out of sight. Her stomach was roiling, and she was sure she was going to vomit. She turned to crawl out of the underbrush and away from the carnage, but the soldier boy didn't move. His eyes were trained blankly on the battlefield.

"Those were my commanders."