



Illustrated by Mark Evans

# I, Bigfoot

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I ran my fur-covered fingers over the yellowing papers my old friend, Squeaker, had stuck to the darkest section of cave wall with tree sap. Moisture had curled the paper, and mildew ate at the edges, but the face of his beautiful Jane remained. She walked in the jungle, holding hands with a primate, her blonde hair clinging to her neck in damp strands. In another magazine clipping, she gazed directly at me, her hair more silver than blonde, her eyes crinkling with the smile of a wise woman. If there was one human my friend had wished he could meet in his lifetime, it would have been Jane Goodall. Now that Squeaker was gone, only his dreams of her remained.

Not that my kind were apt to let our presence be known. But if there was one human who might understand us, it would be her. He had told this to me and me alone, thinking I might share his restless energy and determination for something different than the life my people led

as recluses and nomads. He was right; I wanted something more. And tonight was the night I would get it.

A chorus of snickers erupted from behind me. Little Sister and her two friends shook with laughter. Floppy tangles of hair covered their eyes, though not the sneers of their furless lips. As much as I hated sharing a cave with the seven families of my tribe, it would be worse to be a lone Sasquatch.

My memories flickered to Squeaker's wrinkled eyes and face, and his fur speckled with silver. He had liked telling stories about humans from the old days when the first tribes had lived in the area. He claimed his great-grandfather had been friends with the wise man from the Salish tribe. Sometimes Squeaker recounted adventures he had exploring close to human homes. He hid stashes of magazines under rocks and inside hollows of trees where Old Gray Face wouldn't find them. If it hadn't been for him, I might not have learned to read.

The day Old Gray Face exiled him from our tribe had been the worst in my life.

Little Sister reached for a picture, but I slapped her hand away. She crinkled her nose, brown fur standing on end. "Bigfoot, Old Gray Face said to take down those pictures of that stupid human, not drool over them," Little Sister said in a mixture of words and gestures that made up our language. I noticed the way she said "those pictures." She didn't dare say *Squeaker's pictures*. No one said his name anymore.

Two summers had passed since he'd left. These photos were all that remained. Slowly, I pried the biggest picture from the wall, feeling more of my closest friend disappearing. Even his scent had slipped away from his section of the cave. If it hadn't been for Little Sister, Old Gray Face wouldn't have even found his stash of pictures that I'd made sure remained hidden behind a curtain of hair-like lichen.

Curly Girl, Little Sister's closest comrade, ran her fingers through the thick ringlets of chestnut locks over her arms, a gesture that might have caused one of the other males to drool over her. I rolled my eyes. She may have been Squeaker's granddaughter, but that didn't mean I had to like her.

She batted her eyelashes, her expression so overdramatic she had to be mocking me. "You can't possibly prefer one of those sickly-looking humans to a real female like *he* did. That human would never be able to keep her children warm with those bald arms. She'd never be able to keep you warm." I ignored the way she ogled my big, hairy toes. My feet were bigger than anyone else's, earning me the name Bigfoot.

I tore down the smaller pictures, my heart breaking a little more with each one.

"What would you even say if you met her?" Chatterbox, Little Sister's other friend, asked over my shoulder. "Me Bigfoot, you Jane."

I whirled on them, tired of their taunting. I stood taller—as much as one could in the cave. "I believe the correct usage of their language would be—" I slowly announced the words in perfect English, or what I hoped was perfect English. It was the best I could do from watching campers and hikers and stealing their magazines. "Ahem. 'I, Bigfoot.' Or better yet, 'I am Bigfoot,' or I might even say, 'Pardon me, I am Bigfoot. I am pleased to make your—'"

They rolled on the cave floor screeching with laughter. Teenagers. Not that I was much older, but I didn't think I had ever gone through a phase of acting like a moron. One of the old females shushed the three of them and made them go outside where they wouldn't grate on everyone's nerves.

I wadded up most of the pictures and threw them in Old Gray Face's corner where he napped. His wheezing breath came out in gasps occasionally punctuated by a cough. He might not have been the strongest anymore, nor the one with the biggest feet, but he was the wisest, and I still had to mind him.

I returned to my own section in the back and squatted down to arrange the bedding I'd woven from moss and lichen. Little Sister's grating screech from outside still reached my ears. Sitting in my corner where it was safe, I slipped a picture of Jane Goodall under my mat, hoping no one noticed.

Mother's eyes met mine from across the cave. Old and bent over, her fur silver with age, she

looked more tired than ever. She frowned. I got up and left my bed before she said anything. I didn't need another lecture on, "Don't you think it's time you took a mate? You aren't going to pine away for a human like *he* did, are you?"

It was for the best I snuck out of the cave before my agitation gave me away. While the other males were off raiding campsites to bring back offerings to our leader and rations for the upcoming winter, I was going to the human world. I would find Jane.

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I hesitated when I reached the tree line. The glow of a distant car lit the road. My heart sped up as the engine rumbled closer.

If Old Gray Face discovered I had been this far from the forest, he might shun me this time. He might make me leave the cave and live like a lone wolf—or lone Sasquatch—in my case. If I didn't find another tribe to join, I'd die once winter came. What the wolves didn't consume, my own people would find and scatter, using me as an example of what happened to bad Sasquatches who didn't listen to their leader. Like Squeaker.

I shivered, remembering how I'd followed Squeaker's musky scent, only to find his carcass in the lacy bed of ferns. Forever trapped in my mind would be that blackbird pecking out his eyes.

When the car had passed, I crossed the road and then another. As the trees grew smaller and sparser, the perfume of pine and earth disappeared into the reek of industrial waste. I had never been this far out, even with Squeaker. But he had described the way well enough that I knew where to find the treasure.

That treasure had been the last offering he'd brought. The one Old Gray Face had refused.

My feet whispered over the paved street. I stole past buildings smelling of urine and vomit. They didn't resemble the pristine, white-washed homes I was used to seeing in *Better Homes and Gardens*. I shrank back from streetlights and headed toward the cluster of dumpsters, behind a structure made of uniform, red rock. The distant rhythm of voices echoed from the other side of immense buildings that resembled the jagged, basalt cliff face on the south side of the mountain.

The odors of rotting food mixed with chemicals assaulted my nostrils as I lifted the creaking lid of the garbage can. I kept one ear on those voices in case they came closer. I dug through the refuse, sniffing around for anything edible. Yeast and the spicy sweet aroma of red sauce wafted from a cardboard box. When I opened it, I found three triangles of pizza topped with vegetables. My mouth watered. I took a tentative bite from one that was half eaten. The crust was chewy and hard, but still fresh enough to be flavorful. This pizza would be my salvation. With such an offering, Old Gray Face wouldn't even notice the magazines. I moved on to the larger dumpsters beyond, finding one full of glass and another of plastic. There was nothing I could provide for my tribe from these. No scraps of fabric to wrap around the babies who hadn't yet grown a full coat of fur when winter came. No canned food for when our resources became scarce. Certainly no can opener to replace the one that had broken.

The last dumpster was twice as big as the others. It could have served as a small cave for a family of Sasquatches. When I lifted the lid, one flap fell back against the building with a loud thud. I jumped and glanced over my shoulder, but no humans were in sight. As I turned back to the garbage, my heart swelled with unexpected joy. Not a single magazine covered by moldy spaghetti was before me, but a dumpster half full of nearly pristine magazines and books. Somewhere in there had to be Squeaker's Jane . . . my Jane.

I climbed inside this dream cave and basked in my treasure. Squeaker had told me to look for the magazines with the bright yellow border, the *National Geographic*s, because she would be in those more often than others. I sorted through, flipping pages and examining pictures by moonlight.

Voices rose as humans approached, their words too high and fast to be clear. I peeked over the edge of the dumpster, but didn't see anyone. A woman screamed. Footsteps scuffled on the pavement, closer than before. I ducked under one side of the lid, hoping I might hide and continue my search without being caught. My heart thundered as one set of footsteps grew

closer. Even if I was bigger than any human I might encounter, I would never dare fight one. I knew the stories of our past; the way humans had once hunted my people and forced us into hiding. My people remembered even if theirs had forgotten.

The Moon shifted behind a cloud. The slapping of footsteps on pavement continued. When the clouds parted, the rays fell on a cover with a yellow border and the photo of a woman. I reached for the magazine, certain it was Jane Goodall. Just as I did so, the footsteps skidded to a halt before the dumpster. A figure scrambled up the side and fell in, landing hard on the magazines with an, "Oof." A bag of potato chips and pellets of multi-colored candy spilled out of the open knapsack on the human's back.

I recoiled into the shadows on the opposite side of the dumpster, trying to fit the bulk of my body in the corner under the lid. Panic made the pizza in my stomach flip-flop. I fought the urge to gasp for air and flee. If I just stayed in the corner where it was safe, I might avoid being detected.

The human scrambled into the other corner, face pressed against a crack in the metal. I might have mistaken the figure for a boy with the short hair and slight build, but the perfumes of cosmetics mingling with her female pheromones tingled in my nostrils. Her mess of ebony curls hid her face as she crouched. The girl's ragged breath died down to a quiver. Her skin was darker than my fur, and I couldn't help staring.

Under her tiny foot lay the magazine I wanted. I could now see without question it was a picture of Jane Goodall. She was so close, I could have reached out and grabbed it, but there was no way I could let myself be known. I suddenly understood what Squeaker had meant about not being able to overcome his dread in order to speak with a human.

A voice, deep and damaged by chemicals and disease shouted, "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Two sets of footsteps shuffled past. I held my breath, afraid my ragged pants might give me away. The girl remained frozen in the corner, face pressed up against the crack. I didn't dare move.

She trembled in the torn sweater she wore, wrapping her arms about herself. It wasn't cold, but she didn't have fur like I did. I wondered how it was that humans could have lasted as long as they had with their little feet and hairless arms, as exposed as babies. How was it that they could have overcome the superior strength of Neanderthals and then us?

The feet changed from careless thuds to sneakily slow. They remained nearby, closest to the dumpster where I'd found the pizza. The girl sank back and sighed. Perhaps she didn't hear them and thought the danger had passed.

Now that she was out of the shadows, her naked face became visible in the moonlight. A blue smear of paint circled her brown eyes, almost covering the purplish tinge to the skin around one of them. She was old enough to have mammarys, maybe Little Sister's age, but frailer and more vulnerable looking. I thought again to what Old Gray Face had said about humans caring so little for their own kind that they would have no qualms about hurting one of us. I'd often dreamed it might be otherwise, that we might live in harmony someday. My gut clenched looking again to the bruise on her face. Something about this girl and her fear of her own kind made me wonder if Old Gray Face was right.

Though she sniffed at the air several times, she didn't look at me, but then that came as no surprise. Sasquatches knew the art of stillness, and humans weren't used to using their eyes like my kind did. Oblivious to me or the danger outside, she lifted a magazine, one with red letters and a boy's face on the cover before throwing it aside. Realizing her foot was squished in a slice of pizza, she shifted and scooted it out from underneath her. So much for the perfect offering. There was still one undamaged piece I might be able to salvage after she left.

To my misfortune, she lifted that last piece from the box and sniffed it. I cringed as she bit into it. Now I would have nothing to give as an offering, even if I did get my magazine. I would have to search again. I glanced up at the Moon. It had sunk lower. I needed to hurry and find a new gift so that I could leave and be back to the forest before dawn like the other males.

Her knee crunched into the potato chips that had spilled from her backpack. I flinched at

the way the sound echoed into the nearly silent night. I wanted to shush her, to tell her to stay still, but I knew anything I did would just make the situation worse.

The lid of one of the other dumpsters crashed against the building with a thud. The girl flinched. By this point, her eyes must have grown accustomed to the shadows. She again sniffed at the air, turning her head in my direction.

Her eyes grew wide. She opened her mouth.

I waited for the scream that would bring my end.

Instead, she choked and pizza fell out of her mouth. Her feet kicked out, sending magazines flying, the potato chip bag crinkling. I brought my finger to my lips and shook my head. Whether she understood the gesture, or simply became aware of how much noise she was making, she stopped. She didn't take her eyes off me. The painfully slow shuffle of feet edged closer to the dumpster.

The wind shifted, bringing the men's odor of sweat and alcohol. I wondered if the girl smelled their lust too, and she knew what they intended for her. I could only imagine how they might react if they found me.

If I scrunched up in the shadows where it was safe, they probably would just grab her. They wouldn't notice me or have interest in my magazine. I might be able to salvage the squished slice of pizza and have time to find another gift.

The reek of alcohol grew closer. Two faces peered over the edge of the dumpster.

"Let humans tend to their own problems," Old Gray Face often said. "They'll kill themselves off someday, and we'll reign again."

It was safer to stay in the corner. It was what Old Gray Face would have commanded.

I was certain it wasn't what Squeaker would have said.

"I almost met my Jane," he'd told me once in his creaky squeaky voice as we crouched in the trees past the stream where no one could hear. "It was in my younger days when I used to sneak out to the Place of Learning. That's where the good magazines are."

I leaned forward, all attention. Squeaker scratched his silver chin. "I spied on the humans every chance I could get, wanting to learn like the young humans that go to the Place of Learning. One night, I heard them talking about my Jane. They said she would be giving a lecture there. Can you imagine the thrill it gave me to learn I might meet her?"

The same thrill filled my heart at the idea of speaking with a human. And not just any human, but this wise woman who was said to understand creatures not so different from Sasquatches.

"I snuck up to that building where the lecture would be and listened outside. Her voice was so loud with the help of those magic boxes I could hear her words," Squeaker said. "I kept telling myself I should stop feeling so scared and sneak in. They called her an ambassador. She would want to meet one of us. The room was full of humans like her. Surely they would want to meet one of our people too. I resolved I would do it. I kept edging up to the door, but every time I saw a human, it filled me with panic, and I backed away again. When the lecture was over and a flood of people trickled out the doors, my heart sank. I thought I had missed my chance.

"My hope rose again when I saw her exit with another human. I knew that was my moment. And still, I couldn't make my feet move forward. I couldn't overcome that horror of humans instilled in us from times of old. The blood of a thousand generations before me kept me rooted to my spot."

I tried to make him feel better. "It's for the best you didn't speak with a human. Old Gray Face says it's better to stay away from them. He says they'll kill us. He says—"

"Maybe they would." He sighed, sadness whispering from his hunched form. "But I never tried. That was my one regret. There she was, right in front of me, my Jane. I didn't have the courage to try. But you . . . You know what they say about big feet? It means you have a big brain, too. And I know you have the courage to match it."

After Squeaker left us, I told myself I would continue in his footsteps in secret, no matter what the cost. Just like Squeaker, I resolved to only allow my presence to become known to

the right people. A more difficult task than I had imagined.

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In that moment, as the men's hands reached in to grab at the girl and she screamed, I watched in frozen horror, not wanting to give myself away, just as Squeaker had once been unable to move. At the same time, I knew I couldn't just sit there. This was about more than just me and my danger. I leapt to my feet, knocking back half of the plastic lid against the wall. I roared with everything I had in me.

I loomed over the men, swiping at them, though I had no intention of hitting them. They leapt back and screamed.

"A b-b-bear!" one of them stammered as he ran off.

The other one disappeared into the shadows, his feet a rapid rhythm into the distance. He panted, "Tripping. I'm tripping again."

The girl cowered in her corner, her hands raised protectively over her head. I was fairly certain she recognized I wasn't a bear or a delusion from an intoxicated mind. When she didn't run, I wondered if she was frozen as I had been moments ago.

I sat back down and waited for her to say something. She continued to tremble, her voice coming out in a whimper.

I cleared my throat and ran my clammy palms over the fur of my belly. This was probably going to be my only chance to speak with a human and use my secretly practiced English. Though, I had hoped it might be with a wise woman like Jane who I would get to speak with some day.

My voice came out as a raspy grumble. "Excuse me, I am Bigfoot. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Her eyebrows shot up, her lips parting to let out a giggle. "Nu-huh," she said. "You're, like, um—" More nervous giggles. "You're a hairsuite, or um, no . . . How do you say it? Someone hairsuit? Hirsute?"

I shrugged, having no idea what she was talking about. "I am Bigfoot. Ahem. And you are . . .?"

Her giggle grew maniacal. This really wasn't going the way I had envisioned it would meet- ing a human. On the plus side, she wasn't screaming.

I prompted, "I believe your customs, um, dictate it is now your turn to introduce yourself."

She pinched her arm and giggled again. "I'm not dreaming. I'm—" She broke off into laughter. "I'm Jenny."

"Excuse me, Jenn-neee, but you are on my magazine. And your foot is in my pizza."

"Oh, sorry." Her eyes widened, and she scooted over, grinding her heel into the pizza.

I shook my head and groaned. I placed the remnants of pizza back in the box. After a little searching, I found my yellow-rimmed magazine. Wouldn't you know it?—Jane Goodall's face had been ripped in half. I flipped the pages, hoping to find a good one of her inside. My face flushed with heat, and I quickly turned the page, not wanting this child to see me staring at this woman's toes.

Jenny craned her neck to see the article. "Oh, is that Jane Goodall?"

I shrugged, doing my best not to appear too excited. It was bad enough having female Sasquatches ridicule me. I didn't need a human child to do so as well.

Many of the pages from inside the magazine had been cut out. I didn't find a good picture of Jane Goodall inside. The article mentioned her name, though nothing of her whereabouts or that she'd be giving a lecture in the vicinity. I threw down the magazine in frustration, feeling guilty when Jenny flinched.

"You're from the forest, right? You didn't come to the recycling center just for magazines, did you?" she asked. She didn't say it in the insolent way Little Sister would have. Her innocent curiosity made what I'd done seem all the more stupid.

A picture of a human really wasn't why I was here. I could have tried to describe the restless feeling inside my chest every time I thought of Squeaker and the way he'd almost met Jane Goodall. But I didn't know if I understood what I wanted myself. "I came this way looking for . . ." I struggled for the right words in her language, "an offering for my tribe. I was going to

use the pizza.”

She tapped the box with her tattered, little sneaker. “You mean the pizza I stepped on?”

I glanced at the Moon. I imagined the other males had gotten their pick of items in coolers from campsites—cans of tuna fish and granola bars still in the wrappers. Those would be valuable rations for the long winter ahead when hunting became scarce. It wasn’t like the days when Squeaker had been young and there was abundant food in the forest.

I swung one long leg over the side of the dumpster, then the other. Jenny’s little hands grabbed onto the hair of my arm. “Thank you for scaring those guys away. I . . .” Tears filled her eyes.

I bowed my head. “Go home before they come back.”

Her face crumpled, and she dropped her head into the fur of my shoulder. I stiffened, trying to fight the urge to recoil. I was going to smell of human when I got back. How was I going to explain that to Old Gray Face?

She wailed. “I ran away from home a week ago.”

I patted her head of dark curls. They felt thick and course like my own.

Jenny was an exile like Squeaker. Though, unlike Squeaker, who at least had been experienced and wise in both humans and survival, she was too young and naive to survive on her own.

I shook my head. “Why would you choose . . . ?” Again, I struggled for the words in her language.

“I got in a fight with my mom and—” Her words became lost in her sobs before she started up again. “She doesn’t ever let me do anything. I don’t want to live with her. She doesn’t let me go out after eight and says I’m too young to—”

“Sounds like someone should have listened to her mother.” I hated how much I sounded like Old Gray Face. And yet, was it so bad that he just wanted to keep our tribe safe, to keep our race alive? An instant later, anger boiled up in me when I thought about what he’d done to my dearest friend. Squeaker had been trying to ensure the safety of our race too. I understood what Old Gray Face didn’t. I read the accounts of habitat destruction in the other species of the world; gray wolves, pandas, elephants . . . and now us.

Jenny crossed her arms, suddenly looking petulant. “Yeah? And do you listen to everything your mother tells you?”

I thought of my mother’s nagging to choose a mate and smiled sheepishly. “No . . . I am different from other Sasquatches.”

She snorted, sounding very much like Little Sister. “Yeah, well, I’m not like most humans.”

I lifted her out of the dumpster and set her on her feet. She stared up at me with wide doe eyes that reminded me how young she was. Again, I imagined Little Sister out here in this human world of dangers. I knew what I would say to her, not that she would listen to me.

“Go home. You need your tribe, your family . . . even if you don’t agree with everything they tell you.” I tried to make my voice sound commanding like Old Gray Face’s. I don’t think I quite managed. I sounded more tired and resigned than anything else, but Jenny didn’t argue.

“What if they find me again?” She didn’t have to say who *they* were.

I chewed on my lip. The Moon was closer to the tree line. “How far away do you live? Do you know how to get home?”

She nodded. This was probably the stupidest thing I’d ever done. I hefted her bag over my shoulder and let her lead the way.

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“Do you see this scar?” Old Gray Face had once asked when I was a child. He pointed to a long stretch of bald skin on the side of his face. Even then his face had been gray with age, his eyes weathered with sorrow and time.

“Hunters did that. Probably thought I was a bear.” He leaned toward me, his musky scent of sweat and pine needles sharp in my nose. “And that’s not all they did. They shot me in the leg. The pain was so intense, I couldn’t walk. I had to crawl to get away. That’s what a Sasquatch has to do. You fight the pain because no matter how bad the situation is, you can’t let them

find you. I hid for an entire day in the brush, thinking I might bleed to death. I waited until they'd left to drag myself home because there would only be one thing worse than them finding me. And that would be leading them to the rest of you."

I thought about this as I walked Jenny home. If Old Gray Face knew what I was doing, he'd shun me for certain. He'd remind me how he'd made me promise on the eve of my first raid that I would never allow myself to be seen by a human. Guilt clawed at my insides. I'd broken that promise. But then, I suppose I had broken that promise the day I decided to learn to read and write.

I pulled Jenny into the shadows next to a building as a car passed us.

"I can't let them see me," I told her.

She bit at one of her fingernails. "You're like an endangered species? There aren't many of you left?"

I hesitated, not sure how much I should divulge. "If humans knew, they'd look for us. They'd—" I grunted the word for "exterminate" in my language, unsure how to say it in English. "—the few of us left. You can't tell anyone about me."

Her expression of concern melted into indignation. "That's not what would happen. Scientists would abduct you and do experiments on you." Her eyes became thoughtful, and she took my hand again. "I guess that's not a whole lot better. But not everyone would be like that. I'm not like that."

I didn't say that was because she was a child. "You won't tell anyone?"

"No, I'm not a narc." Though I didn't understand all her words, I knew from the intensity of her eyes that she would keep my secret.

We walked in silence. My throat hurt from so much talking, and my feet ached from the unyielding hardness of the pavement. I tried not to glance at the Moon.

She pointed to a building as flat as a tree stump and wider than the stream I crossed at the bottom of my mountain. The Moon was nearly gone from my view by this point, slipping below the jungle of buildings. Dawn would be approaching soon. I might make it back to the safety of the forest, but I wouldn't make it to the cave. And I wouldn't have time to find a new offering.

She caught me looking at the Moon. "I can see if we have any pizza in the fridge."

I ruffled her locks of curly hair. "It isn't pizza I need."

What I needed was for humans to stop encroaching on my home. To stop hunting our game. To keep poachers away. Jenny was only a child. She couldn't solve the problems of my people any more than Little Sister could end the war and violence in theirs.

Jenny kicked at a metal bottle, the clatter making me twitch. I looked around to see if anyone peeked out their window to see what made the noise. The night remained still and sleeping.

Jenny squeezed my hand. "I feel bad I messed up your offering. I want to make it up to you. You know, to thank you."

I thought about my tribe and the small mound of appropriated canned food in the corner. I considered the baby last winter who had frozen in her mother's arms. My ears remembered the way Old Gray Face coughed all through the night. If we didn't have to hide high in the mountain where it was so cold, we might have had it easier.

I clenched my fists in frustration. "We need a can opener. And a way to keep warm on the coldest nights. And magic to heal the sick. And hope that things might get better someday." I regretted my outburst. I doubted she could do any of that.

"Oh," she said. "That's a lot." Her face brightened. "But I can get you a can opener if you wait for me in the trees around back."

She walked up the stairs to the building. She turned back, as if making sure I was still there. I nodded. She knocked on the door. As soon as it opened, I sank into the shadows.

A woman threw her arms around Jenny. "Sweetie, I was so worried about you! Where have you been?"

I retreated around the back to the trees. I waited, not expecting her to appear. I shifted my weight, weary from travel. I wanted to sit on one of the patio chairs next to the glass doors. As

tired as I was, I didn't dare. I listened to the muffled voices above, unable to make out their words. A light brightened in one of the windows. I couldn't find the Moon on the horizon. This was taking forever.

Even if Jenny gave me a can opener, I was fairly certain I would still be in trouble. But Old Gray Face wouldn't be able to give me a beating with how bad that cough of his was. On the other hand, if I didn't come home with something as good as a can opener. . . .

A door opened on one of the dark balconies above. Someone stepped out. I froze, hoping to remain unseen.

"Bigfoot?" Jenny whispered.

I stepped forward. "I'm here."

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Not unless I'm caught and they put me in one of your zoos. Or I get hunted and stuffed and put in one of your museums. Or if you decide to become ambassador to the last tribes of Sasquatches."

She dropped something from the balcony, a rattling thud in the grass not far from my toes. My heart sank. It definitely was too big to be a can opener. I picked it up, noticing how light and fluffy it was. It was her backpack, stuffed with something soft. Maybe she'd put a blanket in there because I had mentioned we needed to stay warm. I smiled.

"What if I'm hiking in the woods? Would you say hello if you saw me?" Jenny asked.

I wondered if all humans were this strange and unpredictable. My throat tightened, making it difficult to speak. "Yes. Goodbye, Jenny."

"Goodbye, Bigfoot."

The breeze carried the scent of salt and sorrow. She sniffled.

A woman's voice called out from behind her. "Jennifer, what are you doing out there?"

Jenny darted inside and slid the door closed.

The pack rattled as I swung it over my shoulders. I fought the temptation to peer inside. It was a long trek back home, and I had no time to indulge my curiosity.

As dawn crept across the sky, the mountain became visible through the trees, calling me home. My footsteps intermixed with the familiar rhythm of birdsong and animals scurrying in underbrush.

When I neared the human campsites at the base of the mountain, I tread so softly that even I couldn't hear my footsteps. The rattle within the bag remained silent. A dog barked, hailing my presence. I hurried past, my steps no secret to anyone who should be listening.

The rattling in the bag startled me as I quickened my pace. I hid in a cluster of trees, slowly unzipping the backpack. Puffy fabric met my hand as I slid it inside and pulled out a coat. I froze when a bag of potato chips crinkled. I glanced about. A blue bird stared at me as if waiting in expectation.

Inside the bag I found cookies and pizza-flavored potato chips—I smiled at that—matches, a variety of bottles filled with medicines, magazines, and a book.

At the bottom I found what I suspected to be a can opener, though this one looked newer and sleeker than the rusty, broken one. As for the rattling, I suspected it came from the pills inside the bottles. I debated whether I should hide all but the can opener and come back for the rest after dark. The risk that a mountain lion or black bear might find the food forced me to repack it and move on. I put up with the rattling that echoed like a beacon on my back. I kept glancing over my shoulder, making certain no humans followed.

It took nearly all morning to make it back. A greeting of whoops and hollers met me at the edge of the cave. I slid the bag from my aching shoulders. My mother threw her arms around me. "I thought you must have been shot this time. You were gone so long. We were all—"

She sniffed at my fur, at the spot Jenny had buried her face and cried. If it hadn't been the peak of the day when humans might float by on their boats, I could have washed her scent off me. It was too late now.

Little Sister already had the bag open. "You brought back the biggest horde ever!"

I crawled onto my cushions of moss and lichen, wanting to sleep the rest of the day away,

but the commotion over my treasures made that impossible. Little Sister dragged me outside again.

The heat of the day still lingered, my summer coat not quite cool enough to stand in the blunt of sunlight. The females sat in a circle, keeping to the shade. The backpack sat open in the center of them as they arranged the contents in a line next to it. I didn't know where the males were. Maybe they were off discussing what to do with me.

Curly Girl greeted me by thrusting the can opener at me. "You've got the biggest feet out of all of us. Let's see if you've got the biggest brain." The way she ogled my furry toes sent a flush of warmth to my cheeks. Had she always looked at me that way, or was this something new? She seemed older and more mature than I remembered. Perhaps it was the reminder of how thick her fur was on her face compared to the baldness of Jenny's.

I turned my attention to the can opener. The turning mechanism was smooth and soundless, unlike the gritty clickity-click of the old rusty one before it had broken. Curly Girl held a small can of tuna fish.

My gaze darted toward the bushes and trees. "Old Gray Face doesn't like to open the canned provisions except in the winter."

"It isn't like the old one," my mother said, her brown eyes crinkled with concern. "We can't get it to work."

I placed the can opener over the lip of the can and turned the handle. It didn't grab on and cut into the metal. Was it broken? My offering was little more than junk if it didn't work.

My mother placed a mound of fresh blackberries in front of me. I ignored it. As some of the other males returned and marveled over my treasures, I slipped off a few paces, attempting to open the can with fewer onlookers. I tried to fit the thing over the edge of the can, but no matter what I did, I couldn't get it to work. So much for big feet equaling big brains. I threw it into the pile of wrappers and garbage.

My mother had sorted the magazine and book into this heap as well. I lifted the book. There were no pictures and the words were small. It would be a trial to read, but if Jenny had put it in there, she must have wanted me to read it. I slowly mouthed the title, "The Outsiders."

Wouldn't you know it, but that was the moment I caught Old Gray Face watching me as he leaned against a tree. Pine needles were still stuck to his face as though he'd just woken from a nap. I wondered how long he'd been watching.

I dropped the book, the pages fluttering in the mild breeze.

It took but moments for the cheerful grunts and exclamations to die down under the weight of his ominous stare. Curly Girl left the cookies she'd been carefully breaking in half so that there'd be enough for everyone. She joined her family who'd begun to back up. They stared at the patches of clover and ferns covering the ground like I'd already been exiled.

Little Sister nudged the can opener under the magazine and wrappers. The crinkle of cellophane caught Old Gray Face's attention. Little Sister's brown eyes spoke a thousand apologies as they met mine. She drew back and scampered behind Mother. The others shuffled away from my treasures, probably not wanting to be caught with them if they displeased Old Gray Face. He limped forward, his right leg dragging as it always did from the old gunshot wound. The only noise in the silence was his rattling breath. He glanced over the food and medicine, his expression remaining a stern mask. He kicked the can opener out from the pile of garbage.

His eyes narrowed. "You couldn't even find a can opener that worked, could you? You went out, thinking you were being courageous by endangering yourself. Is that what you think, it's heroic to risk the lives of all of us for a broken can opener?" He lifted his chin, his eyes sweeping over the others. "You want to celebrate someone who's going to get us all killed?"

He broke into a fit of coughing.

I hung my head in shame. My gaze fell on the bottle of green liquid that said, "Cough Syrup." I picked it up. "This should help your cough," I said.

He knocked the medicine from my outstretched hand, releasing a sharp bark of cough. I cringed back.

He stomped down on my horde, scattering the open box of cookies Curly Girl had carefully

been dividing. She was turned away like her family, her father's arm around her shoulders. She shuddered at the crunch of Old Gray Face's feet over wrappers and food.

"Trash! It's all trash!" Old Gray Face roared. The thunder of his voice sent up a group of birds from the trees.

"The can opener isn't trash," someone whispered.

A rumbling growl, part anger and part congestion sounded in the back of Old Gray Face's throat.

Broken Nose stepped forward, his eyes remaining on the ground. "It's not broken like the old one, it just works different."

He brought forward the can of tuna fish and knelt down with the can opener. Instead of placing it over the lip of the can, he held it against the top. A satisfying pop sounded as the metal bit into the can and he peeled the lid away. He held it up. "It digs into the side of the can and pushes down the metal. There aren't any jagged edges. It's a new kind." He ran his finger over the edge of the metal, demonstrating. Old Gray Face's severe expression didn't change. Broken Nose pushed it closer to Old Gray Face.

"A can opener isn't going to save Bigfoot from exile," the old Sasquatch said.

My mother's muffled wail rose up from behind me. My heart sank.

Broken Nose retreated a few steps, but not quite to the circle around me. He hung his head too, I guessed because he didn't wish to challenge Old Gray Face's authority. I supposed he didn't wish to taint himself with my dishonor.

"Are you going to exile me too for knowing how to use it?" Broken Nose asked quietly.

His words sinking in, I stared at him with horror. My chest felt as though it would break under the weight of guilt. I had not only sentenced myself to exile, but I would bring another with me.

Old Gray Face backhanded him across the face. Quiet Feet, Broken Nose's Wife twitched, but she didn't move out of the circle. I held my breath, praying to the forest spirits to protect him . . . mainly from stupidity like mine.

"Go join your family," Old Gray Face said.

Broken Nose licked at the trickle of blood on his lip. "How do you think I learned to use it? Do you really think I figured that out all by myself? I had to get close enough to see them use it, didn't I?"

Old Gray Face opened his mouth, his words turning into a cough and then into a rattling breath. The anger in Old Gray Face's frame melted into sorrow as he shook his head. "You both will need to leave."

Grunt stepped forward. "Last year when I jumped into the ravine to get away from poachers, I didn't set my own leg like I told you. The park ranger found me. I thought he was going to kill me and it was going to be over for all of us—just like you said would happen. But he shot me with something that made me numb and sleepy. He fixed my leg and gave me food. He wasn't like the other humans."

A rattling rumble started in Old Gray Face's chest. Before he could say a word, Curly Girl broke away from her parents, tears in her eyes. "If they're to leave, I must leave too. Half a moon ago, I was going through the garbage bin by the park office early in the morning while the males were out hunting. One of the rangers, the female one, saw me. She didn't do anything. She was scared, nearly as scared as I was, but then she smiled at me and waved, and I think she greeted me. I've watched her since then, wondering if she might be different from the other humans. I've wondered if she might be able to help us in the winter."

Curly Girl's parents shook their heads and tried to pull her back to her spot beside them, but with the graceful beauty of a mountain lion, she slipped away and strode toward me. She took my hand. My jaw dropped. I had never imagined Curly Girl of all people to go off alone and explore close to the human camps. Part of me felt angry with her for being so bold. And part of me admired her for being brave.

She gazed into my eyes and smiled through her mop of dark curls. Never had her brown eyes looked more proud or beautiful. Never had her feet walked with such lithe rhythm. Heat

flushed to my face, and I looked away from her feet. Now really wasn't the time for that.

"I think someone saw me once, too," one of the males said from the other side of the circle.

"One of the campers gave me his peanut butter," someone else said.

The skin under Old Gray Face's fur was turning red. The pungent odor of anger leaked from his pores. His wheezing came out in shallow, congested pants.

I scanned the faces turned toward me, not everyone, but many in my tribe. I raised my chin, staring Old Gray Face in his bloodshot eyes. "Our old ways are broken. You can't expect us to share this forest and not to run into humans, especially if we're close enough to steal provisions. You can't expect us not to learn how to adapt, can you? If we're going to survive, we can't just sit by and let them keep pushing us farther and farther into the forest. We can't stay hiding forever. Pretty soon we're going to find there's no forest left." I gazed at the expectant faces around me. I picked up the book with a shaky hand. Out of it twirled a small photo, twisting downward like a leaf caught in the wind. I caught it and smiled, seeing it was Jenny. Surely if a diminutive youth could get over her fear of me, I could also get over my fear of humans. My people could overcome their trepidation of humanity. Resolve stole over me. "It's time to come out of the corner. It's time to stop being a myth." I held open the book to show my tribe the words. "We need to learn to read and write in their language so we can have a voice. This world is our world too. They need to share it with us. But that's never going to happen if they don't know we're here."

Old Gray Face studied the faces that were staring, not at him, but at me. His voice was barely audible. "You will not endanger my tribe. I will not let you."

His tribe. A pack of Sasquatches sticking to the old ways. From the faces looking to me, I could see not all were as set on this as he was. "I have no intention of endangering *your* tribe. But those of us who are ready to move away from the old ways—" the broken ways, "may wish to join me and form a new tribe."

Broken Nose held out his hand to Quiet Feet. His wife joined him, bringing their children along with them. Grunt stood beside me, his younger brother joining him. Little Sister looked from Curly Girl and me back to mother who shook with silent tears. My chest ached with sorrow as I saw what this new tribe would cost me.

It would be a long road ahead for my people, studying their language and culture, and searching for another human who might not want to hunt or dissect us. It would be prudent to begin with the park rangers, to return to Jenny or other humans we knew were safe. I looked again at the photo of Jenny. Her dark eyes stared directly into mine, her smile full of warmth. Someday Jenny's photo would go up on a new cave wall. Ironically, she was completely opposite from the wise woman I'd hoped to find. What I hadn't realized was that I hadn't needed to find a human. I had needed to leave my safe, little corner in order to find myself.

*Sarina Dorie has sold over 150 short stories to markets like Analog, Daily Science Fiction, Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Orson Scott Card's IGMS, Cosmos, and Abyss and Apex. Her stories and published novels have won humor contests and Romance Writer of America awards. She has sold three novels to publishers. Her steampunk romance series, The Memory Thief, and her collections, Fairies, Robots and Unicorns—Oh My! and Ghosts, Werewolves and Zombies—Oh My! are available on Amazon, along with a dozen other novels she has written. Recently she has released a series titled Womby's School for Wayward Witches.*

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