

## Dark and Light

I watched my brother load his rifle swiftly before aggressively cocking it. Mother told me that I should go with him today to learn from his professional skills. I don't wanna go, however, I just want to play with the other neighborhood kids under the *happy tree*. We played a lot of outdoor games after my family and I moved here. They taught me how to catch a dragon's tail by running around in circles, trying to catch the opponent's hanging handkerchief that's tucked neatly in their back pocket. We were just about to play the mice game next, but Mother told me I should watch how my brother makes money. My curiosity seeped into my mind like shadows engulfing the light of pure joy of playing outside.

Hugo, my brother, promised me that he would show me something worth seeing inside the woods. Going deeper in the woods contradicts his empty promise for I do not like what the butterflies are saying inside my gut. This forest is forcing me to demand an exit from my brother, but I could no longer see the bright meadows that once welcomed us. Each and every step, I kept seeing and hearing numerous types of animals whether they're big or small. The thought of being eaten alive sends shivers through my spine while my hair at the back of my neck rise. Is this how my brother makes money to buy our food? Being eaten alive? *That's silly*, I thought to myself. I can clearly see my living brother walking in front of me with his rifle swinging on his shoulder. He looks

like a soldier, but he wears a mud brown bucket hat instead of a camouflaged helmet.

My small body flinched at the sound of twigs breaking aside from my noisy footsteps. A deafening shriek escaped my pink lips, so I sealed it shut immediately by clamping a hand against my mouth.

“Stop being a wimp, Penny,” his voice is ragged, but soft like my blue pillow back home in Germany. He picked me up and lightly flicked my nose. “Nothing will come after you as long as I’m here.” I looked at the big gun on his shoulder.

“And the gun.” I told him without breaking my stare on his beloved gun.

“And the gun.” He echoed with a small laugh.

“But, Mother says Penny needs to be careful.” His crooked smile shuts away the warnings in my brain about being a meal.

“Yes, and Penny will be careful if she’s silent throughout this exciting journey.” He tapped his pointy finger on my nose twice before slowly putting me back on my heels. He held my hand while the other secures his gun strap. We walked away without creating any further sounds, then halted behind the thick trees that look like sticks piercing the blue skies. No, they look more of like drinking straws that’s made out of wood with dagger-like leaves growing out of it.

A sudden earthquake shook the ground beneath us that sends a jolt on my feet. Should I run? But I don’t know where to go nor to hide. This

forest is like a maze filled with vicious creatures that are waiting for me to kiss their bait. I turned to my brother who aimed his rifle at the stick-like trees from a few metres away from where our feet are planted.

“Get behind me.” Hugo’s tone made me run behind him for cover. I peeked a little to see what kind of monster it is. Is it dangerous? Does it eat people? *I don’t want to know*. A sound of thunder ring in my ears when the whole forest started shaking. What is happening?

“H-hugo, I’m scared.” I stuttered as I speak.

“Not now, Penny.” He pressed his eye against the rifle scope to aim at the beast behind the thin trees. I saw a flash of black and white to where my brother is aiming, so I had to squint to get a clearer view. The color started to fade until the green hues are the only remaining in my sight. “Curses, it got away!” Hugo yelled frustratedly.

“Is the monster gone?” He tried not to yell at me by nodding. Relief washed over me then grabbed his clenched hand to smooth out the pale knuckles. “Let’s go home, Hugo. I’m sure it will come back tomorrow.”

He nodded once again.

We walked through where the monster was from and our jaw dropped from what we’re witnessing. This monster is no doubt really strong to be able to break these green trees like skewers so easily. I knocked on the other trees to see how hard it is. My brother is indeed strong but he cannot break this tree alone with his rough bare hands.

“Hugo, what are these trees?” He glanced at me for a second before kneeling down to examine the footprints left behind by the monster.

“These are called *bamboos*, Penny. They look like straws, don’t they?” I nodded before kneeling next to him. “This is weird. There are black bears in this area?” He asked himself.

“Maybe it’s the *tapir*.” I said, remembering how the kids described a monster that eats nails on their gates.

“There are no tapirs here, Penny. Besides, tapirs are not this big.” I shuddered at the thought of an animal this size going berserk in the village we live in. “I’m certain that this is a bear, but how did they end up in this area?”

“Maybe they don’t feel safe at their old home.” Hugo looked at me and pinched my cheek.

“Oh Penny, you’re too young to understand this. C’mon, let’s head back.” He picked me up again then we went straight home.

After eating my mother’s *kung pao chicken*, she picked me up from my seat then carried me to my room. She turned my night light on before tucking me to bed.

“Did you enjoy your walk?” She asked as she fixed my blanket.

“I didn’t see how Hugo makes money.” I replied while toying with my small fingers.

“Don’t worry, baby. You’ll see it soon.” She fished a keychain from her pocket then placed it on my palm. “This will be your lucky charm. It would grant your wish on seeing what is worth seeing in those woods.”

“Just like Johnny’s promise?” She nodded.

“Go to sleep. I love you.” She planted a kiss on my forehead before exiting my room. I looked at the keychain and smiled. It’s a circle that divides light and dark, with a dot from the opposite color of each near the rim. I remember my brother telling me that it’s called a *yin yang*. He said it’s what defines us from who we are today by embracing our differences and imperfections.

I put the keychain on top of my nightstand beside my lamp then shut my eyes tightly. Dreamworld was about to reach me when I heard the same boom of thunder from the woods this afternoon. I scrambled on the floor and looked out my window to see if it’s about to rain. The moonlight towers above me with no clouds to restrain its beauty. This sent chills to my spine knowing that the sound wasn’t from the sky. The bamboo trees started to sway in a distance until one of them fell on the floor.

A pair of eyes glowed from where it stands. I pulled the curtain closer to my face to hide my trembling body from this fearsome monster. I watched the four-legged creature come out from the dark to sit beside

the fallen bamboo. My eyes went wide when a flash of black and white seemed to appear again, but this time, I realized it's the creature's hues.

The creature picked up the bamboo and started to nibble it like a baby. No, it really does look like a fluffy baby bear but the size of a humongous one. My feet automatically moved by jumping out of my window and landed from a few feet drop. I approached the animal slowly but surely, then dropped my knees on the floor with my head tilted sideways. I watched it swallow the remaining bamboo shoot then lies down on the floor like a sleeping human being. I laughed when it started rubbing its back on the dirt. I couldn't help but be in awe about this creature that is made of nothing but joy. There are no dangers here. The only danger here would be the people who would harm an innocent creature such as this furry mammal before me.

"Penny! Get back!" My eyes went wide at the sight of my brother aiming his rifle at the creature behind.

"No, Hugo! Can't you see? The creature won't hurt me." I took a daring step forward towards the sitting animal. We locked our gazes, and as if I sensed a forming connection between us, bonded by our ever-growing friendship for protecting him from my brother.

"Get away from that thing! Right now, Penny!" Hugo cocked his gun this time, but I refused still. I stuck a hand out to touch the creature's fluffy black and white head. I don't know what to hope for

from doing this. Either my unguaranteed safety or my brother not killing this innocent animal.

To both our surprise, the animal obliged to my touch.

It didn't bite my arm off nor ran away. It enjoyed my presence as a human who will never see him as my meal nor would it also see me as his. This creature I'm patting right now made me remember the yin yang keychain. Black and white, and how it defines us from who we are today. Perfection and imperfection bounded as one.

"Penny, step aside so I could shoot the bear. Now!" He roared but I persisted.

"Hugo, do you remember your promise?" His eyebrows collided at my irrelevant question but he remained alert.

"What does that have to do with this?" I stepped aside but my hand is still on the top of his head.

"You promised me that you're gonna show me something worth seeing. Perhaps, you broke that promise already." I giggled when it started rolling on its tummy like a dog. Lowering down his gun, it seemed that I have his attention rather than the fluffy animal. "Hugo, I think this is how you make your money."

Hugo dropped the rifle on the floor before sprinting towards me and my furry friend. He started laughing when he took out his flashlight to look at the animal more clearly. Its eyes are like a raccoon but his

body is built like a bear. A unique black and white color that outshines the other bear species found in textbooks.

“You did it, Penny. This will be a marvelous discovery! I need to contact my men to bring this animal back to Germany.” He was about to head back inside to call the others like him, but I tugged the hem of his shirt. “What is it, Penny?”

“Please don’t let them take him.” I begged. I glanced over my shoulder to look at the black and white creature breaking another bamboo for him to eat. “Let them live quietly here. This is their home.”

“I can’t do that, Penny. I’m a zoologist. I need to show them what we discovered.” He softly says but I shook my head.

“Please?” He breathed out a sigh before finally giving up by nodding.

“What should we call it then?” We watched the creature turned its back on us then slowly fades into view.

“A panda.” I said with a bright smile on my face. “Like Penny. Penny and Panda.” Johnny just chuckled in return before messing my hair.

“Panda it is then.” He picked me up before we both went back inside our home, hoping to see our friend Panda to come visit us again tomorrow.