

The Favor

by Ingrid K. V. Hardy

“You did *what?*”

“Well, the bike is a classic. Getting the proper parts for it just isn't easy.”

“You'll end up like smeared all over the road doing things like that, and I'll have to pick you up again. Geez. Watch out for this branch-”

Bruce held a long, low branch as he waited for Keith to approach, preventing it from slapping into his follower. Pale yellow and peach-tinted clouds stretched across the powder blue sky, silent as death while the brilliant sun rose slowly above the horizon.

The two men trudged through the small copse of bush and trees, chatting guardedly as neighbors often do, saying one thing while thinking the complete opposite or wishing there was a more important task to take care of, like spending quality time with the pet rat.

“Is it much further? This chain saw is gaining weight...” Keith shifted the saw from one hand to the other.

“Nope, the clearing is just ahead. We can get this done within a couple of hours and that'll be that.”

“Aren't you afraid of being caught? It must be protected for a reason...”

The upward-slanting meadow the two men walked into was brightly spotted with late-summer flowers, just now beginning to open with the sun's rising, allowing a touch of fragrance to waft on the breeze.

Bruce shrugged his hefty frame, also getting tired of carrying the electric saw but not wanting to admit it.

“This is my land. I can do what I want on it; nobody's going to tell me otherwise. I'll take them to court if I have to, I got rights.”

They topped the meadow's hill and paused as their destination couldn't be clearer. Despite himself, Keith let a word of surprise slip

from his mouth, and Bruce glanced at his partner-in-crime with satisfaction. His neighbor had not expected what waited for them.

“That’ll keep my fireplace happy for an entire winter, it will, and keep the wife off my back about the price of firewood.” Bruce rubbed his beer-belly absently.

In front of them was a tree that seemed to defy the definition of what a tree was supposed to be. While only a bit taller than the trees nearby, it was enormously wide, with branches upon branches stretching out everywhere, many of them bare, too old to carry leaves. The roots were even more impressive. Massive, many of them were raised out of the ground, slithering in and around the smaller ones that were still solidly supporting both the ground and the tree, like several families of squid rambling the sea bottom.

“Wow. No wonder it is protected, that tree must be several hundred years old...” Keith was properly impressed, and his desire to return a favor was dwindling.

“Ok then little buddy, I hope you took your vitamins this morning, ‘cuz this will be heavy work. Let's get to it,” Heaving up his chain saw again, Bruce started down the slight descent toward the immovable shepherd, looking just a bit more pleased than perhaps he should about the task in front of him.

“I don't see how this beautiful old tree is bothering you, this piece of land you have is huge and you aren't doing anything with it, really...” Keith's hackles had risen a bit at the words ‘little buddy’. He put down his own chainsaw as he came beside Bruce, and caught his breath after the long walk.

“There are lots of trees you could cut down here instead of this one,” He added with maybe just a bit more vinegar than necessary, “It's not preventing you from doing anything.”

“Look, you owe me one. Who else had a trailer to go pick up you and your decrepit old British motorcycle from the middle of nowhere? Honestly, you should dump that thing and get one of those speedy new ones. They actually start when you turn the key.”

Keith took another deep breath, not at all pleased now with the decision he had made that day in the rain.

"My piece of land is just as big as yours, Bruce, take some of all the dead trees I have on it. Really, they are yours then, as thanks for your favor." Keith tried not to spit out the word, but was sure he failed.

"No one is going to tell me what I can and cannot do on *my* own land. This eyesore is mine to do with what I please. And I will be pleased when it is gone!"

"But you risk the law-"

"Oh hell, you are thick... What are they going to do? When the damn thing is gone, they can't do anything. They never do! Oh they give you a little fine, but even that, all I will have to do is prove the tree is blocking proper water drainage or something like that and they are happy. They don't care any more than I do! The damned thing is half dead anyway!"

Gesturing at the tree's dead branches, Bruce was getting more and more agitated as the debate went on, and flexed his muscles in anticipation of the job ahead. Keith had not seen this side of his least-favorite country neighbor before. He liked him even less now, but a deal was a deal. He sighed and picked up his chainsaw, its razor-sharp teeth shooting reflections from the barely risen sun.

He watched Bruce pick up his machine as well, and looked once again at the great goliath and its grand trunk as wide as five men together.

"Bruce, really. Imagine the tales this tree could tell us... The history it has seen, everything it could tell us in the rings of its life, the things it has yet to see. It is a part of *your* land's history, it could tell you so much if you let it! Don't you want to know more?"

"Shut up and start your machine! I already know everything I need to!"

Bruce's expression was not kind as he chugged the chain of his saw. Within moments, the wooded area shuddered with the racket of first one machine and then another.

The peach sky faded into pale yellow as the hours wore on, the early morning dead and gone.

Keith's heart was unexpectedly heavy as he help put an end to the grand Methuselah, to an entity that had been in the same place for longer than humans had lived in the area. He felt like he was killing his great-grandmother.

As the sun hit the second half of the sky, a ridiculously large pickup truck wended its way to pick up blocks of time. It took a total of five trips to do so.

Keith looked at the now-empty spot, ashamedly imagining the grief of the young companion trees, and just as shamefully thinking how stupid he was to the forest was grieving.

"They are just trees, for crying out loud," he chastised himself.

His neighbor now gone to happily show off his pile of wood, Keith looked for the last time at the vacuous space he helped create and turned away, his head hanging.

And there, right in front of him, as small and fragile as snowflakes in the sun was a small green sprout, its leaves so tiny and straight. Just four inches tall, the little seedling had escaped the demise of its predecessor.

With a gesture of respect and apology, Keith carefully walked around the future, and away from the past.

