

## The Child of the Forest

Topic - Whispers from the Jungle

He expected comfort, for the first time he was surrounded by his own and under the shelter of a tent with something soft between him and the rough ground he is so familiar with. But the absence of the soothsaying whispers was replaced by the harsh rain which pattered against the tent almost bitterly, allowing him no rest. As if the forest itself was confused as to why it's child, its sentinel had been the guiding hand leading the invaders.

In his insomnia, all he could do was recollect the very first night. The night he opened his eyes for the first time, clawed his way out of the mud, and gasped for the first breath of air his lungs had ever known. Shaking, he struggled upright on trembling limbs and gazed up at the towering trees above him.

Their twisted branches wove together so tightly that only slivers of moonlight pierced through, scattering across the marshy ground in jagged patterns of silver. The world, like him, was alive.

And then he heard it—the forest.

It spoke, not with words, but with whispers that brushed the edges of his mind like the wind through leaves. The voices sang to him, promising to guide him, to care for him as he would care for them.

They named him their sentinel, their shield. He was not born of flesh but of purpose, crafted in the image of their foe. A babe in an adult's body, instinctive yet blank, imbued with a mission as ancient as the jungle's roots.

That night, the jungle gave him life. It gave him belonging.

And now under that cold tent, he closed his eyes in trepidation over that bond

He awoke alongside the rising sun, and the invaders stirred soon after. Their pack kept their distance, watchful like wild boars

sniffing at unfamiliar ground—bristling, tense, ready to charge at the slightest provocation. All but their leader—the tall, gaunt old man with a scraggly beard and a commanding voice, deep as the ancient forest itself.

The old man's face spoke of miles walked through hardship and horrors endured, yet it was he who first extended kindness, offering the sentinel the first warm meal he had ever tasted. The sentinel's bewilderment seemed to amuse them, but they let him eat as much as he could gorge on.

But the fleeting warmth dissolved. The air grew taut again, heavy with unspoken tension as they remembered their purpose. The old man shuffled through his belongings, pulling out something wrapped in worn cloth. He unwrapped it carefully, revealing a weathered image of what they sought—the Pearl Lotus, a flower said to bloom deep within the heart of the forest's caves. The pack's eyes gleamed greedily as they gazed upon the image, as

though it were divine, a treasure that demanded worship or conquest.

The sentinel's senses shattered. The whispers, long-muted, broke their silence violently, shrieking through his mind like a tempest. Fear and guilt twisted in his chest as he realized his mistake: trusting the invaders even for a moment. His fists clenched as he stumbled back, desperate to retreat into the safety of the trees.

But the pack closed in, bristling like enraged boars, tusks in the form of cold steel and rough hands. They snarled commands, some attempting to wrestle him down, others pointing weapons at his chest. The trees quaked under winds summoned by the sentinel's mounting terror.

The old man roared, his voice slicing through the chaos like a blade. The pack froze mid-motion, their wildness subdued by the sheer gravity of his command. Slowly, they released their grip on

the sentinel, though not enough to allow him full freedom. The old man, steady and deliberate, retrieved his belongings, pulling out new images from his files.

Rummaging through his weathered files, the old man pulled out newer images and thrust them before the sentinel. His heart recoiled in revulsion. Humans and villages, blighted with grotesque, tumorous growths that twisted flesh into unrecognizable forms. A valley of rotting trees crumbled into the earth, their husks cradling a red sun that bled across an empty wasteland of decay.

Fear coursed through the sentinel's veins. How could he protect his forest from such a threat? The old man bent to pick up the muddied image of the Pearl Lotus, which had fallen to the ground during the scuffle. With deliberate movements, he pointed at the chaotic blight in the photos, then at the flower. The connection was undeniable, the message clear even without words. The

whispers shrieked in the sentinel's ears, a cacophony of warnings, but his resolve began to waver.

The sentinel's fists trembled as the whispers shrieked in his ears, their warnings urgent and sharp. It was in their nature to resist, to protect at all costs. But the sentinel's resolve hardened in that moment. His glorious purpose was not simply to preserve the forest in stasis but to shield it from ruin.

He was no fool to surrender the heart of the forest blindly to these invaders. Yet neither could he stand idle and watch as his home succumbed to decay. Slowly, warily, he let down his guard.

Sensing his surrender, the boars loosened their ranks, stepping back into uneasy stillness.

The old man clapped his hands, and in an instant, his men sprang into action, preparing their gear with practiced urgency. The child of the forest and the prophetic invader locked eyes, a silent understanding passing between them. The man offered the child a drink, his gesture unspoken but clear.

The whispers of the forest, though frantic in their warnings, were nothing more than distant murmurs to the sentinel, like the chirping of crickets on a warm evening. He hesitated, then took a sip of the spiced liquid. It was neither unpleasant nor particularly enjoyable, but its warmth soothed his throat as he swallowed.

For a moment, they shared a quiet amusement, a flicker of mutual recognition in their exchange, as the men readied themselves for the hunt ahead.

The old man gestured for the sentinel to take the lead, offering only rough instructions to his men—far from the warmth he'd shown the child of the forest. As the sentinel readied himself and began to move ahead, he expected the old man to follow. But the invader stood still, watching, his eyes lingering as the pack vanished into the thick jungle.

The sentinel hesitated, a creeping unease settling in his chest. The untamed boars would not be controlled. Chaos was their nature, and he feared the destruction they would bring to his

home. As he moved forward, gliding through the jungle like a river overcoming jagged rocks, the invaders followed with brute force, hacking through the dense undergrowth without hesitation or care.

The forest seemed to react in kind. The air grew heavy, as though the land itself resented the intrusion. Streams that once meandered peacefully now roared with wild currents. The cliffs rose sharply, the wind howling at the edges, making even the birds struggle against the gales. The waterfalls, once serene, had doubled in size, their roaring torrents crashing over the rocks, making the path slippery and treacherous.

For the first time, the sentinel felt the weight of his home's judgment. The whispers in his mind, once familiar and full of guidance, had grown distant, as if the forest itself were looking at him from afar. They spoke still, but in low tones, conferring with each other as if deciding whether he was still worthy of their trust.



He had never felt so alone. The trial before him was not just an external struggle, but an internal one—a test of his loyalty, his resolve, and his faith. The weight of his purpose, once clear and unwavering, now felt heavy, like the oppressive heat before a storm.

But through their struggle, something unexpected blossomed. As the nights passed, the raging boars began to grow familiar with their unlikely ally. They shared strange gifts that mystified him, and for the first time, he found a measure of solace in their company. In return, they followed his guidance, shifting from their chaotic ways to move with the forest, flowing through it rather than hacking their way through. Within a few nights, they had reached the peak of their journey—standing at the foot of the hill that marked the final stretch. This would be their last night of rest before the true trial of their quest began.

As the stars settled overhead and the men settled into uneasy rest, the sentinel could not sleep. Was it the whispers, now

sorrowful and distant, that kept him awake? Or was it his own fear of betrayal—his fear of straying from his sacred duty? Even though the men, for all their strange ways, had grown kind to him a part of him still held back. As the others drifted into slumber, he sat still, gazing into the dense jungle, waiting for his tiredness to surrender to sleep.

That's when he saw it. Movement in the bushes. A pair of eyes, locked with his own. He gasped, his mouth opening to scream—but before the sound could escape, a leopard pounced from above, landing with terrifying grace on one of the men. Its claws sank deep into the jugular, killing him in an instant. The others bolted upright in shock, but before they could react, the leopard turned on another, tearing into his face while the man's horrified screams gurgled out swallowed by his own blood.

The men scrambled for weapons in shock, but the leopard was faster. It leaped toward its next target.. But before the beast could strike, the child of the forest acted. He charged forward, taking up

a weapon one of the men had dropped, and dealt a swift blow, ending the leopard's life in a single strike.

When the dust settled, the scene was one of chaos. Two men lay dead by the leopard's claws, but the worst was yet to come. Two others had fallen prey to a venomous snake, their deaths unnoticed until it was too late. Now, only two men remained—scarred and battered.

The child of the forest stood frozen, his heart heavy with guilt. In defending the men, he had killed a creature of the forest, his own kin. But even worse, the forest itself had struck the first blow. The whispers had turned to sorrowful wails in his mind. With a cry that echoed through the jungle, he swore to forsake the forest. At dawn, they would retrieve the lotus—and then he would leave, never to return to the place that had once been his home.

Come morning, they climbed to the mountain's peak and descended into its heart. Each step echoed with the relentless

whispers pounding in the sentinel's mind like a fevered drumbeat.  
This was the heart of the jungle. The sacred place.

Under a shaft of moonlight rising from a crystal-clear spring, it stood—the Pearl Lotus. Its petals shimmered with ethereal light, patterns spiraling inward as if they held the secrets of the cosmos. Petals within petals, endless in their perfection, beckoning all who beheld it. The air around it felt heavy, sacred, as though time itself had stilled in reverence. The men, stoic throughout their perilous journey, faltered. They wrenched open a canister, pulled out a knife but their courage failed them. Fear rooted them to the ground, their trembling hands unable to desecrate such divine beauty.

But the sentinel had reached his breaking point. The whispers gnawed at his mind, their shrieks a betrayal that left him hollow. Gripping the knife he'd seen the boars wield, he strode forward, hacking the flower free with a savage stroke.

A scream tore through the air—a scream like the forest itself had been stabbed in the heart. The sentinel fell to the ground, writhing in agony as the pounding echoes reverberated through his skull. And then... silence. The whispers were gone.

The men sealed the flower in the canister, lifted the trembling sentinel to his feet, and began their return journey. The forest stood unnervingly still, stripped of its former hostility. The watchful gaze that had loomed over them was gone. Yet fear gripped their hearts, allowing them no quarter.

Their once-thunderous journey turned to one of hushed caution. Every step was measured, every watch kept with feverish diligence. Each night was restless, their sleep fractured by memories of death and terror.

On the final night, as one man kept watch as the sentinel and another slept. A sudden scuffle jolted him awake. The watcher had turned on the man holding the canister, strangling him with a

thick vine. The sentinel shot up, heart pounding, paralyzed by the chaos unfolding before him.

In a blind frenzy, fearing for his life, he lunged with a blade and stabbed the attacker. Blood sprayed across the ground and painted his trembling hands. Silence returned, heavy and suffocating. Only he remained now.

Utterly shattered, the child of the forest fled through the night, running like a silver fox through the tangled wilderness. The canister glowed faintly in his grasp, his tears mixing with the blood on his skin. He cried out into the dark, hoping—praying—that the old man would understand.

By dawn, he stumbled into the old man's camp, bloodied, scarred, and shaking. His legs wavered beneath him, splinters piercing his skin. Tears streaked his face, and his eyes glistened with desperation as he held out the canister.

The old man rose, his expression inscrutable as he walked toward the trembling child. Silently, he took the canister, opening it with a practiced flick of his knife. The Pearl Lotus gleamed within, mesmerizing even him. For a fleeting moment, the coldness on his face broke, and a faint smile flickered.

But it was gone as quickly as it came.

With the canister in one hand and the knife in the other, the old man stepped forward and drove the blade straight through the child's heart.

The sentinel did not scream. He was too tired, too broken. His eyes, glassy with tears, met the old man's with a grim, resigned acceptance. He crumpled to the ground, returning to the mud from which he had come.

The old man stood over the lifeless body, wiped the blade clean, and walked away, disappearing from the forest without a backward glance.

