HEADLIGHTS

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Headlights spill across the asphalt, puddles of sickly yellow threatening to be swallowed by the dark. The road stretches out endlessly before the mud-spattered ute, a gaping wound carved through the forest. On either side, trees loom like the pillars of some ancient temple, holding up the starless void above.

Tyler grinds his foot into the accelerator. It had taken longer than he thought to pack his kill into the ute—the sun's been down for several hours by now. Long enough for the chill to creep into the vehicle and root itself against his prickling spine.

The speedometer ticks up to *100*, then to *110*. Nothing else is going to be on a road this remote, this late, anyway. Best just to get home.

He pulls out his phone, eyes squinting against the sudden brightness. From the screen, the deer's hollow eyes glare back at him, coat slick with blood, antlers gleaming in the last of the sunset. Below it, an error message accosts him. The photo still hasn't sent, then. He's not surprised—reception's crap up here. Maybe he'll have better luck with a text instead. He types one-handed:

Yoy missed out bro gkt a oretty big buck todsuy. On way back niw

The one time Richie wasn't there, Tyler had shot a huge one. Impressive crown of antlers and everything. Tyler's mouth quirks up in a smirk. His brother is going to be so pissed.

Another line of red text pops up. *Not sent. Waiting to connect.*

Outside his window, shadows shift within the foliage. The forest creaks softly as trees shudder in the steady brush of the wind.

He doesn't remember the drive taking this long. He can't help but wonder whether he's missed his turn-off in the midst of this simmering darkness, but that can't be right. The road has always been nothing but a straight, unbroken line unspooling ahead of him.

He can almost hear something call out, ragged and desperate—no. Just the rustling of leaves, contorted by his mind into the muffled shape of words.

Tyler's fingers drum rapidly on the steering wheel. At the edges of his vision, it all seems to melt together—the twisted mess of forest blurring into the rigid lines of asphalt. Spindly branches reach out with a greedy, gleeful hunger, grasping eagerly at the passing ute. The forest has Tyler surrounded, and it seems to be closing in.

He slams on the brakes too late.

A deafening *THUMP*.

Blink.

white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel

Blink.

headlights shut off. the

weight of the darkness crushing down on his chest.

Tyler's foot is still pressed hard onto the brake. His back still braced against the leather of the seat.

Goddammit. He must've hit something.

Must've been a possum. No, bigger than that. Maybe a deer.

Blink. Breathe.

Fumbling around. Shaking hands grasp his phone. Trembling fingers curl around the door handle.

Tyler wrenches open the car door and stumbles into the night.

The emptiness is a held breath. Time seems to ooze, reality fraying at the seams.

Tyler flicks on his phone's torch. The bonnet of his ute is a mess of crumpled metal. Useless. How the hell is he supposed to get home now?

With a disbelieving scoff at his misfortune, Tyler strides around the front to take a look at that deer he hit—

It wasn't a deer.

Tyler's brow furrows.

There is nothing there at all.

Tyler whirls around, goosebumps rippling across his skin, pulse hammering a desperate rhythm in his ears.

The stifling darkness breathes out around him, a whispered chuckle tossing up dust that dances in the dull glow of his phone's torch. A moth flits into the light and before he can think, Tyler's fist is closed around it, wings crumpling beneath his grip.

He uncurls his fingers. The moth's limp body drifts downwards, and Tyler grinds it into the ground with his heel.

Beyond the road, the forest bares its teeth. Branches scrape at the asphalt, sharpening themselves like claws. The trees stretch out their contorted limbs, reaching, beckoning.

In the distance, a light flickers in and out of view. A glow of artificial yellow bobbing between the trees.

A torch. There must be someone in the forest.

“Hey!” he shouts to the glinting light ahead. “My car’s just crashed, I could use some help.”

The beam of torchlight only moves further into the trees.

Tyler swallows down the fear congealing at the back of his throat. He sets off at a jog—

and is smothered by the forest. A twisted lattice of branches closes over him, silhouettes like jagged antlers slicing into the sky. Undergrowth tugs at him, ferns twining around his legs as he staggers forward.

As he passes, the bush shivers. A streak of movement bursts out of the foliage, a riotous flurry of feathers and wingbeats and then gone again.

Tyler lurches away, rasping breaths tumbling from his throat.

Just a morepork. He’d have shot the damn thing if he still had his rifle with him. He grits his teeth and slams his boot into the base of the nearest tree instead, ripping into papery bark with the force of it.

The damp forest air almost feels like moss crawling along Tyler’s skin. He jerks his head as if to shake it off, and begins to run, picking up speed. His boots pound into the earth, and with every footfall he thinks he can feel the dirt trickling into his mouth, worms writhing on his tongue. He gasps, but it feels as if his lungs are made of gnarled wood, solid and suffocating.

Something seems to be stirring behind the trees, beneath the dirt.

Tyler clenches his fists until he can remember the feeling of the deer's warm blood slicking his knuckles. He can defend himself from whatever's out there. He just needs to catch up to the person with the torch.

"You there!" he calls, but his voice betrays him, ragged and desperate. "Wait."

The light seems to pause for a moment.

Now that he's gained on it, Tyler realises there isn't one light, but two. Side by side, like the unblinking yellow eyes of some huge, lurking creature.

He breaks into a sprint. His heart hurls itself against the confines of his ribcage, legs drumming to the same urgent rhythm. Thorns tear at vulnerable skin, the ravenous forest digging in its claws. Roots thrash beneath the leaf litter, wrenching themselves upwards and grabbing at his ankles.

His foot catches and he plummets to the ground, arms buckling, outstretched palms skinned by rocks and roots and bark, face hitting the dirt. He scrambles back up as the convulsing forest latches onto him, ripping clutching branches away from his face as he careens towards the lights—

Tyler rushes free of the forest and onto smooth asphalt.

He stumbles to a halt in the middle of the empty road.

He needs to get back to his car. Where is—

Tyler's stomach roils as he spins, slowly, to turn his gaze to the road behind him.

Two beams of light are staring him down.

A mud-spattered ute barrels down the asphalt towards him.

The screech of brakes too late.

He is frozen, blinded, as the headlights wash over him.

A deafening *THUMP*.

Blink.

white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel

Blink.

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