

The Huntsman
by
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Do not enter the forest after dark my father had said, there is nothing but danger there. But the wolves have gone, the past winter was too harsh for them and now, the forest is peaceful. I managed to forage some mushrooms, some roots and best of all, a rabbit that was caught in my snare. Father and I shall eat well tonight, perhaps after he has given me a scolding for defying him and entering the forest. I am sure he will forget it once his belly is full. If there is any leftover, I shall take it to Luke, for he is on watch tonight. The forest is peaceful this evening, the light of the moon shining between the trees lighting my way. I move swiftly, my shoes, though thin, still make the leaves covering the ground crunch beneath them. I pass the great old oak, a tree that has been in the forest longer than my father has been alive, longer than his father and his father before him. I smile as I walk around the tree, fingers gently tracing the surface, the bark rough on my fingers. Luke and I had our first kiss here and I smile at the memory. I turn to head back to the path, to head home, yet I stop. For there is a man standing in the trees before me. He is standing in the shadows, the darkness hiding his features, but I believe he is wearing a hood. There is something in his hands, a bow perhaps? Is he one of the king's hunters? Surely it is too late to be hunting. I swallow, then bow to him.

'Hello,' I said, 'Good evening.'

The man remains silent and unmoving, hidden in the darkness. I swallow and shift my feet uncomfortably.

'Well...have a pleasant evening.' I say as I move to step away from him and continue towards the path. As I move, he too moves, matching my speed and direction, stepping before me and blocking my path.

'Come now, this isn't funny.' I say, trying to keep my voice firm, but failing as it broke, 'Let me pass, I have to go home.'

The figure raises the object in his hand and with a motion, I see that it is indeed a bow, a longbow and as I am speaking, he is knocking an arrow.

'I wish you luck with your hunt,' I say, 'But please let me pass.'

As I take a step to move around him, his bow string cracks loudly and there is a whistle past my ear. My cheek feels wet and upon raising a hand to it, I feel warmth. Even in the light of the moon, I can see my fingers are red.

'What are...?' I start to say, only to stop. My eyes grow wide as I watch the man, draw his bow with yet another arrow. He points it directly at me, the wood and string creaking in the silence of the forest. My basket of mushrooms bounces as it hits the ground, sending my bounty spilling onto the floor, the rabbit tumbling out lifelessly. I flee into the darkness, the sound of the cracking bow fading behind me. A moment later, an arrow strikes a tree to my right, moments before I run past it. I scream, I cannot help it. I want to remain silent and lose the man in the darkness of the woods, but no matter how much I try, a long piercing scream erupts from my body. I run, stumble, run again, scream, trip, fall, scabble, continue to run and become tangled in foliage, unsure where I am going, lost in the dark forest.

A small orange dot appears through the darkness and at first I believe it to be a trick, some kind of illusion, yet I find myself moving towards it, hoping and praying that it would offer a form of salvation. I trip once more on something, perhaps a tree root, I cannot quite tell. I crash onto my face, my legs spiraling over my head as pain lances through my spine. I scramble to my feet, soles slipping on the cold and damp leaves. I lurch forwards, pushing through a hedge and out onto the other side, revealing the source of the light, a small hovel. I run forwards, tears already streaming down my cheeks, my fists balling up as I reach the door. I pound against the door as hard as I can as I scream.

'Help me, please help me!'

I hear voices on the other side of the door and a moment later, it is yanked open so hard, I nearly stumble through the doorway. The person who opened the door is a woman, with a shock of grey hair and somewhat hooked nose, with a chain of herbs and wooden charms around her neck. I feel the air in my lungs turn into a squeak.

'What is wrong child?' The woman says as she holds her hand out towards me, her deep and dark eyes fixed on my face, possibly on the line of blood now dried on my cheek. I stare at her hand, fearful to take it, for this is Kara, the town witch. If I take her hand then...then she might curse me or worse. My hand slaps into her palm, her fingers wrapping around in an instant. With a firm, yet somewhat gentle movement, she pulls me inside and closes the door behind me. As she bolts the door behind us, I look around the inside of her hovel. It is warm and full of the glow of a well stacked fire, over which hang a number of kettles and pots, all of which are steaming. Dried herbs hang from the ceiling, while some dead animals, rabbits, pheasants and ducks hang with them. Shelves hold a number of jars full of various liquids and objects, possibly ingredients for her potions. Sat on a small wooden stall to the left of the fire is a man who I recognise as a local woodcutter, yet I do not know his name. He is whittling something that looks like a horse and after a moment, he looks up at me, a frown on his face.

'Kara, who is this?' he asks. Kara moves around me and to my front, moving as if she was floating. She waves her hand at the man dismissively without taking her eyes off of me, 'Hush Henry. Please, sit by the fire. Would you like some tea?'

I open my mouth to answer, only for nothing to come out. Instead I manage a nod. With a gentle smile that feels unusual for a witch, she leads me to another stool by the fire, before taking a small iron kettle off a hook and pouring steaming liquid into a cup. I take it with trembling hands and sip it.

'Now, tell me child, what is happening? Why are you in this state?' Kara asks, clasping her hands together before her. Immediately my heart, which had calmed after entering the hovel, is hammering again,

'There was a man. A man in the woods. A huntsman I think. He...He tried to kill me. I think. He loosed an arrow at me. It... it cut my cheek.'

Henry has stopped his whittling and is looking over the room to me. Kara turns and looks at him, their eyes meeting for a moment.

'Someone was...hunting you? Trying to kill you?' Henry asks, his voice low. I barely manage a nod.

'Did they follow you here?'

I sniff loudly, 'I don't know. It was too dark and I-'

My voice is cut off by a deafening bang on the door, silencing the room. I stare at the door, eyes

wide, breath frozen in my chest. Henry and Kara exchange another look, before Henry stands. As he rises, he seems to grow in height, becoming a giant of a man, quite possibly the tallest man I have ever seen. He carefully walks towards the fire, above which rests a somewhat worn yet heavy woodsman axe. Reaching up with arms of muscle that rival a tree trunk, he removes it from its stand and looks at Kara.

'Stay here.' he says quietly, 'Wait for me to come back in.'

He approaches the door, the axe held casually at his side.

'Anyone there?' he calls out, voice loud and commanding. The door thunders again with another strike.

'There is nothing for you here friend. Move along.' Henry shouts.

The door thunders twice more, followed by the audible clomp of heavy footsteps receding.

Henry, upon listening for a few moments, finally unbolts the door.

'Don't!' I utter.

'They ran off,' Henry says, 'Probably just some stupid kids looking to scare some folks. Either way, I'm going to have a look around.'

He pulls the door open and steps outside, the orange glow of the hovel's fire spilling out into the dark of night. He looks around, then turns and heads out of sight, towards the right of the house.

'Whoever it was,' Kara says as she turns back to me, 'They are gone. Henry is right, they were probably just some miscreants trying to get a scare out of you.'

'Perhaps...' I say, sipping on the tea and keeping an eye on the open door, 'They certainly got it. I was so scared. I really thought he would kill me.'

Kara gently pats my head, 'You are safe now, no need to fear.'

I find myself smiling. Even after all of the stories and rumours regarding Kara, that she steals children away in the night and would curse you with boils or boil your bones, I found that she was in fact, kind. Footsteps approach the door, signaling Henry's return and we turn our heads to look towards him. Both of us scream as someone steps into the doorway and becomes illuminated by the fire. They wear a Huntsman's garb, dark green wool cloth with leather belts and a hood obscuring their face, their bow slung over their shoulder and in their right hand, a long dagger, dripping with blood. In their left hand, they hold Henry's head, his eyes twisted, tongue lolling out and blood flowing from the cut on the neck. I scream again as I leap to my feet, my cup of tea flying across the room. To my surprise, I find myself being shoved backwards.

'There is a door in the rear. Use it and flee. Get to the town. Alert the town guard.' Kara says. She has picked up the stool that I had been sitting upon and is holding it by one of the legs, akin to a club.

'Go. Now!' she bellows at me, not taking her eyes off of the Huntsman, whose eyes I cannot see, but could feel burning into me. I do not need to be told twice. I turn and flee through the back of the hovel as Kara bellows and charges the Huntsman, swinging her makeshift weapon at him. There is a dull thud as he drops Henry's head and darts at her. They crash together, limbs flailing, knife slashing, stool bludgeoning, teeth gnashing and nails clawing. They vanish from sight as I pass through the hovel into the back, where I find the door and yank it open, all while the sounds of clattering, smashing glass and grunts come from the other room. As I step out into the cold night, a single long and piercing scream fills the air, quickly followed by silence. I run into the dark forest.

I run as fast as my aching legs will carry me, over fallen trees, under low hanging branches and through bushes that claw at my clothes. I do not know where I am going, but I pray to merciful God that I am heading towards the town. I have to get there, I have to find and alert the town guard. I have to find Luke. I am suddenly in the open, the trees having come to an end and before me is a road that leads directly to the town. There is a snap of a twig behind me and I instinctively duck. The air whistles as the blade passes over my head and I scramble forwards. I turn to face the Huntsman who is already coming at me again, dagger glinting as he thrusts it towards me. It strikes me in the side, slicing through my clothes and cutting my skin deeply. I feel the hot blood flow down my side, staining my clothes. The Huntsman goes to strike again and in a moment of madness, I decide to attack. I grab at the hand that holds his dagger, screaming as I try to wrestle it from his hands. We struggle for a time, moving back and forth, the blade of his dagger a hair's width from my face. In a flash of movement, the blade slashes my forehead, more blood spilling out from the wound. I scream as we wrestle before he punches me in the side, right on the wound he had just given me, causing the air in my lungs to expel and my legs to give out. He shoves me back and I fall, tumbling down the embankment and onto the road, my chin hitting the ground hard. I lay there, for how long I do not know. I wince at the pain that spreads through my body, while my lungs painfully beg for air that finally comes in a loud and agonising wheeze. I can hear him coming, his heavy boots thudding on the ground as he follows me down the embankment. As he reaches the bottom, his foot slips on the wet grass and he stumbles, putting his hands out before him to prevent his fall.

I have to use this opportunity. If I didn't take advantage of it, I would die here on the road. My hands and feet scrabble against the dirt, then my knees, skin scraping painfully. I scramble on all fours for a few moments, before rising to my feet, finally making it to a run in the direction of the town. I can barely see as I run, a mix of blood pouring into my eyes and stinging tears. I run through the streets, desperately looking for the town guard, yet I find none. The tavern. They must be drinking in the tavern. I turn down an alley, only for a figure to appear at the other end. I duck down, pressing myself to a barrel, hoping it is enough to hide me in shadow. I could not see if the figure at the end was the Huntsman, but the sound of drunken singing reveals to me that it is not. I think, wondering if I dare expose myself to this man. He is drunk, would he be able to help me or would he merely be a distraction? Before I can come to a decision, he stops singing.

'Henlo? You...who...who...oh, hen-hello. But-bit late to go bun-hinting...hunting. Ha. Hahaha. Hey, whaaaa...are yo-you-' his voice stops with the sound of slashing metal and slicing flesh. Liquid splatters the ground and a gurgle comes from his slurred mouth. The Huntsman, standing before him, has thrust his dagger into the man's chest. He stabs again and again and again, the man's chest squelching with each thrust. The drunk wobbles there for a moment, perhaps from the drink, perhaps from the strikes, then falls back. The Huntsman looks down at the body and I take the opportunity to leave my hiding spot and run.

Dark streets pass, houses with glowing windows and smoking chimneys blur as I run past them and then, like a glowing beacon of salvation, it appears. The Boars Head, the tavern of the town. Even from here, I can see the glow of the fire, smell the cooking food, the deep brown ale and best of all, I can hear the chatter of its patrons. Within, I will surely be safe. I run towards it,

take hold of the door handle and turn it sharply. The door opens and I stumble through, my legs giving way beneath me. As I tumble to the ground, the chatter of the tavern turns to utter silence. I push myself up and look around, seeing a number of eyes on me, yet I do not see Luke. Some patrons are still holding their drinks, some halfway to their mouths. A degree of whispers and mutters began to spread throughout the tavern.

'Help me...' I utter, my voice barely a whisper.

'Had a bit too much eh, Katherine?' a voice calls out, followed by a round of obnoxious laughter. I manage to get to my knees and press my hand to my head, smearing it with blood. I hold it out towards them.

'Please help me. A man is trying to kill me.'

'Looking like that, I'm not surprised.' another voice calls out, producing another bout of loud laughter from everyone. Even the women were laughing at me. Desperate, I look around and see the town guards in the corner of the room, still wearing their uniforms with axes and clubs on their belts. I am sad to see Luke is not among them. I manage to get to my feet and stumble towards them, whimpering in pain as I move. I reach their table, accidentally knocking over one of their drinks as I reach them.

'Please, help me,' I say, 'There is a'

'You stupid bitch!' one of the guards shouts as the beer spills into his lap, causing him to jump to his feet.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' He bellows as he grabs me by the wrist and starts to yank me towards the door.

'No, no please you have to help me. He's already killed others...' I scream at the other guards, who continue to drink and chat as if I wasn't even there. I struggle against the guard's grip but he is far too strong and I am exhausted. He gets me to the door and pulls me through, then shoves me forward so I fall and I land face first in the mud.

'Go take your lies to the witch in the forest, girl. They aren't welcome here.' he snarls, before he slams the door shut and a moment later, the muffled chatter of the tavern starts again.

'Katherine?' I hear someone call my name. I look up, seeing a man approaching me, adorned in a cloak and town guard uniform and his name escapes my mouth, 'Luke.'

'what are you...is that blood?'

I leap to my feet and immediately fall into his arms. They wrap around me as I press my head to his chest, the hard metal of his breastplate cold against my cheek.

'Luke.' I say, taking just a moment to feel completely safe. After a moment, he releases his grip on me and moves me back so he can look into my eyes.

'Katherine, my love, what is happening?' he asked. My eyes quickly break from his to look at the sword on his belt. His father's sword.

'There's a man. A Huntsman. He has tried to kill me. He has killed others. I tried to explain to the others in the tavern but they threw me out.'

Luke looks at my face for several moments then gives a small nod.

'they will believe me when I say it. Come, let us get you inside. You are safe n-'

Wet blood splatters my face. Luke's eyes have gone wide and blood is dribbling from his mouth. A finger's breadth from my face is an arrowhead, having passed right through Luke's neck. I feel

the grip of his hands go slack and he falls back. I am running and screaming before his body has even hit the ground.

As I run, my vision is blurred from fear, blood and tears, shadows and light producing shapes near to nightmares. Out there, watching in the darkness somewhere is the Huntsman, waiting for me. Through the blur I see a shape, a tall tower against the night sky. The church. Oh blessed Lord, the church. The church will protect me from this madness. Father Abel knows me, for he christened me after my birth and I have taken communion from him every Sunday. He was due to wed Luke and I before....before...

As I run towards the building, I slip several times, losing a shoe after one hard stumble, yet I leave it behind. The church grows closer, the spire rising higher and higher, the statues on its sides covered in shadow, yet I can feel their eyes on me as I approach. I reach the bottom of the steps at the front, take a deep breath, then start up them. I dare not look behind me as I ascended the stairs, fearful of the Huntsman being right there at my back. I reach the tall wooden doors and my body slams against them, my fists immediately pounding on the surface. 'Sanctuary!' I scream, 'sanctuary! Blessed God give me sanctuary!'

My fists hammer on the door for several more moments as I wait for an answer, as I pray for salvation, yet I am met with silence. The door does not open and with horror, I realise the church is closed to me. I turn, my back pressing against the wood, my hands clasping together in terrified prayer. The Huntsman is here, slowly approaching, his bow held in his hand. He slowly ascends the steps while the dark sky of night starts to brighten, the sun moments away from rising. The Huntsman stops before me, his body casting me in shadow.

'Heavenly father, please save me.' I sob, hands clenched together before my face. The Huntsman crouches before me and using his free hand, pulls back his hood.

'The Heavenly father loves you Katherine.' Father Abel says as he brushes my hair from my eyes, 'You shall enter his Kingdom.'

I gasp as something metal slides between my ribs, the cold spreading through my body and my vision blurring. A single long breath escapes my lungs while the sun peeks over the horizon, light spilling across the land like spiked ink across a table, allowing me to see one final sunrise.