

### The Hunter in the Forest

I stared at the forest before me. In just a short amount of time I shall journey into that very forest to hunt the beast that plagues this area.

The bounty at hand, had been around for years. Many brave souls had ventured deep into those very woods to hunt the beast and claim the reward for themselves. Hunters and non-hunters alike have met their end and were never seen from again once they entered.

“You should stay away from that forest if you know what is good for you lad.”

I turned around and was met with an older woman standing near him.

*‘Had I been so deep in thought that I did not hear her approach?’*

“Many have died within that forest. It is best to just leave the beast alone. The only time it ever brings harm those that live within the town, is if they go to kill the beast.”

“You believe that it is a peaceful one that only attacks when provoked?”

He stared at the woman and noticed that she did not dress like the other people within the town.

“I do. I have come across said beast and it only attacks when it is threatened.” She explained with a straight face, that showed no emotion.

*\*Howl\* \*Howl\**

We then slowly turned our attention back towards the woods as a wolf howled in the distance.

“Heed my warning young one, leave and do not venture inside, or you will only suffer within and no one can save you.” She said as she began to turn and walk away.

I began to ponder over her words. ‘*Should I turn back and head home? No, the money alone would allow his family to flourish and survive the coming winter.*’ And so with my family on my mind I began to head into the forest.

The change in lighting was almost instant, as darkness surrounded me all around, but I still ventured deeper into the woods. It almost felt as if I was walking towards my doom, yet I was determined to collect the reward for the beast that was within the forest.

“Beware of the forest, a foul beast dwells within.”

“If you value your life, don’t journey past the trees.”

Those words of warning rung in my head, and I slowly began to hesitate as I travelled deeper into the dark forest.

“Maybe I should have heeded the villagers warning, or at least tried to gather more information on the beast that I am chasing.”

He recalled the description that was given by the villagers. A beast that was as tall, if not taller, than a man. It had a ghastly mouth that contained a multitude of sharp and deadly teeth that could cut through flesh easily. It smelled of death and decay that followed wherever it went. It had claws that were as long as a forearm and could fell trees in one foul slash of its hand. What fantastical beast did they believe this was? I began to rationalize and believe that it is either a large bear or a wolf.

Every turn of my head, I realized that I was surrounded by trees every way I turned. Legends had been spread of the beast that lived within the woods to far away lands. Being a hunter, I was not one that would shy away from danger and saw this beast as the next best conquest to prove my worth.

*\*Crunch\* \*Crunch\**

Every step I took, crushed branches and leaves under my feet. This noise was unwanted as it would alert my prey of someone nearby.

As the forest became denser, I began to notice large claw marks on multiple trees.

“Could a bear have done this? Surely not as the townsfolk were terrified of something worse than a bear.” I pondered.

A fog began to settle around myself, further obscuring, my already limited, view. I gripped my rifle even more than I already was that my knuckles began to turn white.

*\*Howl\* \*Howl\**

“Well now I can confirm that there are indeed wolves within these woods.”

Each step I took, I began to feel eyes upon me. Quickly surveying the area around me I found nothing. No footprints nearby, no noise of branches breaking or leaves crinkling, that would alert me of someone being near.

After venturing further, I decided to set up camp nearby. I had not seen any sign of the beast besides the claw marks, and I began to feel as if my efforts were futile.

The small fire I built was the only light besides the moon that illuminated the trees around him. As the shadows danced around, he heard the crunch of leaves behind him.

“Who goes there? Be you man or beast?”

I stood on my feet with my rifle, loaded and ready to fire, pointing at the group of trees where the noise originated. My eyes were frantic as I looked for any sign of who or what made that noise.

However, I saw nothing but darkness that was staring right back at me.

“Steel yourself man! You cannot be afraid, and you must not hesitate within the woods. If I were to make the wrong move I could easily perish and meet my end within this very forest.”

As I began to turn back and look at the fire, a powerful gust of wind came and snuffed out the fire in one fell swoop. The wind sent a deep chill down my spine and traveled throughout my whole body. The air became so cold that it bit at my skin as it howled. Shocked I took a step back and looked around.

*“You should not have come here.”*

I began to frantically look around and find where the voice had come from.

“Who are you? Are you the one that plagues the village?” I asked frantically.

*“You must flee now, or you will become like me. Trapped within the very place I perished with only the trees as company.”*

The disembodied voice became clearer and louder as he spoke. Almost as if they were right behind me, but there was no one near me as I turned to face the voice.

The fire then came back to life after the voice spoke, the air had lost its bite and seemingly returned to normal. As I looked around, I noticed the trees began to ooze what looked like sap. Upon looking closer at the substance, to my horror I realized that it was not sap but blood. The crimson liquid began to flow out of every tree that surrounded me.

“What trickery is this? How is this even possible?” I spoke frantically.

*“RUN!”* The mysterious voice bellowed into the air.

I jumped at the voice and quickly began to gather my belongings. Each movement I made was frantic and my hands were constantly shaking.

I quickly got on my feet and began to run back the way I came. However, I quickly began to realize my mistake. I had not made any markings to show the way I came. I was essentially running blindly, and it seemed as if I was running even deeper into the forest.

*\*Thump\* \*Crunch\* \*Thump\* \*Crunch\**

The sound of rough and powerful movements reached my ears and I began looking frantically around myself to identify what was near me.

“Why did I venture into these woods? Curse me and my arrogance in thinking that I could kill the beast here, when everyone before me failed.” I said almost sobbing.

My family would now have to live without me and not know what truly happened to me in the end. I only pray that they are able to live a long and healthy life. I began to feel like I failed them and sobbed even harder. The tears began to blur my vision, but it made no difference.

The fog had become even worse than when I first entered. I suddenly ran into a tree and fell to the ground in pain.

*\*Thump\* \*Crunch\* \*Thump\* \*Crunch\**

The loud footsteps were coming closer and I knew that I needed to get back up and continue to flee from this beast that was chasing me.

“You should know that there is no hope in escaping now.” Came a calm and familiar voice.

I turned towards the voice and I saw the older woman, who I had talked to before I left. *‘Why is she within the forest? She said to not enter the forest, but why is she here? Surely, she knows that she in an equal amount of danger as I am just by being here.’*

My breathing was labored, and I quickly tried to steady, not only my breathing, but also my heart. The pounding of my heart was so intense that I felt as if my heart would leap out of my chest. There was a ringing in my ears and my body was in pain from hitting the tree and running frantically.

“Hurry we must flee; it had begun pursuing me and we must leave now.” I stated and held my hand out for her to take so we may flee together.

“I warned you about venturing into the woods. I told you to leave, but you did not listen. Now I have to prevent you from leaving. Such a pity that you have to die as you are quite a handsome young man.” She stated rather calmly.

*“Why must you torture the boy. Stop your actions and leave him be. Too many have suffered from your hands ancient one.”*

I then saw a multitude of specters begin to appear around us forming a circle. *‘Why have they gathered near us? Were they here to help me escape?’*

“Now you know better than to try and stop me. After all, don’t you remember how you became what you are now?” The woman spoke as she looked at the specter in front of us.

I slowly began to creep away when she noticed my movement and began to advance towards me.

As she took each step, her appearance began to change. Her head began to change into that of a wolf. Sharp fangs were glistening white within the moonlight as she flashed a smile. Her arms began to grow hair and her hands began to transform into claws. I slowly realized that those claws matched the claw marks I had first seen when I entered the forest.

As I began to shake myself out of the state of shock and fear from witnessing this grizzly and ghastly transformation, I quickly began running away from her. I was solely driven by fear and horror to continue my escape from these cursed woods.

I was frantic and terrified as I began to weave through the trees in hopes of confusing her and to keep her from catching me easily.

*\*THUMP\* \*CRUNCH\* \*THUMP\* \*CRUNCH\**

I could hear her speed increasing and began to push myself further to continue onward. I then began to see trees becoming less dense. And then I saw it, the end of the tree line. I was nearly out of the forest and then I could get to the town to help me.

The light shining through made my movements even more frantic. Just as I was about to step out of the forest, I was pulled back into the very forest I was escaping from.

“No. No. NO! NO! NOOOOOOOO! HELP ME!” I screamed at the top of my lungs in hopes someone would hear my call, but alas no one heard my frantic pleas.

I looked around and attempted to get back up to continue my escape, but I was met with a dark shadow casting over myself as she pounced onto me and tore into my skin. I screamed in agony and pleaded for mercy, but it fell on deaf ears and the only one to hear my pleas was the moon.

*\*Howl\* \*Howl\* \*Howl\**

The howls in the air mocked me as I fell prey to the wolf above me. I then became another specter within the forest that fell prey to the she-wolf and would wander forever as I would watch countless other fools venture in, only to meet their demise like I did, and to warn them of the danger they face should they enter. For death was the only thing I found in the forest, and the Grim Reaper had come to claim his bounty on me in the end.