

Shadows
In
Pinewood



“If the ranger couldn’t catch it, what makes you think you can?”, the burly man enquired as he leaned over the table, grossly encroaching on Diona’s personal space.

Confined by her chair she pulled away ever so slightly, overwhelmed by the man’s body odor as she stared coldly into his eyes. “Because it’s my job.” she replied calmly, ice in her voice.

“But yer a woman” a hoarse voice croaked from the skinny man at her flank.

Diona jerked her head back in the other direction, trying to escape this new, equally horrible stench. This time it was the skinny man’s rotten breath that assailed her nose, and made her grimace.

“Arnt ye afred it’ll eet yer pretty lil face?” he continued in his crass dialect.

Does this man simply refuse to pronounce vowels the way they are meant to? she thought to herself as she tried to mask her

disgust. The other men at the table joined in as he started laughing. *Well they're clearly having a jolly good time at my expense*, she thought.

Diona surveyed the small inn as she ate another spoonful of utterly forgettable porridge. Outside of the seven men now hovering over her table, only 2 old drunkards and the barmaid were present. No help to be found there.

“Maybe you should just leave the huntin’ to the men, eh sweetheart?” The big one suggested with a sly smirk.

Diona slowly moved the wide brimmed leather hat on the table in front of her a bit to the left, carefully measuring the distance from the hat to the mans face with her eyes. Ruffles, her small pupy, started growling and barking at the man from somewhere below the table. He was clearly no more fond of the company than Diona was.

“I mean, there’s no reason risking a fine piece of woman like yourself to the claws of that beast.” he continued while he leaned in closer, lazily swinging a foot out aiming for Ruffles.

“Alright, that’s enough!” She exclaimed with a loud clear voice. She struck out with her right hand, removing the arm the man was resting his weight on from the table.

As he lost his balance and fell forward she grabbed his neck with her left hand and slammed his face into the table with a hollow thunk, barely missing the hat. In the same motion she raised her right hand holding one of her crossbows, produced from somewhere underneath her coat, aiming it straight at

the spindly man who immediately drew back.

“Listen here you bastards!” she said, voice firm, staring daggers at the five other men. They were all backing away, shocked by the sudden burst of movement. The big guy squirmed under her grasp and whimpered a bit but she held him fast. “I assure you gentlemen, that I’m perfectly capable of doing my job” she held a brief dramatic pause to let the words sink in before she continued “just as I’m quite capable of eating my dinner, all by myself.” She let go of her grip on the man’s neck and he instantly retreated from the table, revealing a smashed nose and a face smeared in his own blood.

“I do appreciate the concern, but not quite as much as I’d appreciate it if you all scurried back to those holes you most assuredly came from.”

An eerie moment of silence went by as everyone took measure of the situation. Diona forced herself to simply remain calm, and focused on producing the most menacing stare she could muster. She let her gaze fall upon each of them in turn. After what felt like an eternity one of them finally shook his head “This en’t worth it” he mumbled as he backed out the front door, everyone else following close behind.

Diona slowly released the air from her lungs in a long soft exhale. *Thank the light those fools don’t know the difference between a loaded and an unloaded Crossbow.* She thought to herself. *There’s no way I could have taken them all on at once.*

She put the crossbow on the table, as she returned to her

food. Might as well just keep it there to deter anyone else who felt like disturbing her supper. *Is this even supper?*, she thought glumly as she looked at the grey mass in her spoon, making a face at it.

“That was amazing!” a voice cried out behind her.

Diona nearly had a heart attack as a boy came up from behind and sat down on the chair opposite her. How had she missed him? He must have sat in her blind spot.

“Damn it boy, you can’t sneak up on people like that” she berated him.

“Oh, I’m sorry” he said, looking apologetically at her while brushing brown hair out of his eyes. “I’m just so excited, I’ve never seen an actual Hunter before” he continued with a broad smile. “Are you with the Inquisition?”

He could be no more than 13, maybe even younger. “Mhm” she grunted looking at him with one eye as she began eating again. Ruffles was curiously inspecting the boy, walking around him and sniffing his legs.

“Have you ever killed one before? A Werewolf I mean” the boy asked enthusiastically.

Slowly chewing, she trained her eyes on him, “what’s it to you boy?” she asked at length. She could feel his big eyes inspecting her, taking in all the details of her dark red leather

coat and her long brown braid falling off her shoulder.

“I.. I don’t know” he said shyly, “I just thought..” he trailed off, clearly unprepared for this turn in the conversation. He was clearly struggling with something he wanted to say, so Diona simply inserted another spoonful of porridge into her mouth while she waited for him to muster the courage. “I.. I want to help” he finally stammered. She looked curiously at him as he continued “I know I can’t do much, but I’ll do anything you ask of me, I just want to help”.

What is it with the people in this town, she thought to herself as she grabbed her hat from the table and put it on her head. “What would your parents have to say?” She asked and stood up from the table.

“I don’t have any..” he said softly. “My mother died from the flu when I was little, and my father was taken by the wolf last year”.

Diona grimaced, but continued reholstering the crossbow inside the coat. *Damn me and my big mouth*. She stood there inspecting her uniform for a little while, buying time to think. Finally she looked directly into the boys piercing blue eyes.

“Alright, listen. I can’t promise you that we’ll even catch the thing, and if we do..” the boy started rising in his seat with an ecstatic look on his face. Diona grabbed his shoulder and forcefully pushed him back into the chair, “and if we

do” she resumed “I can not promise you your safety... So no, you cannot come with me”. He looked back at her with an expression so distraught Diona was convinced she could physically see his heart breaking.

“I promise, I won’t get in the way” he tried weakly.

Diona was already striding towards the door. She could feel herself about to do something stupid, but maybe she could make it out in time.

“I don’t care if I die” he tried again with more tenacity, his voice was starting to sound desperate. “I just want that damnable beast to never hurt anyone else”.

Diona stood in the doorway, one hand on the door, frozen in place. *Damn it, just a few more steps* she thought, *just keep walking*. She turned on her heel and stalked right back to the boy, put her face uncomfortably close to his, staring him straight in the eyes, inhaling sharply. The boy stared back unabashed but clearly uncertain, unsure what was about to happen.

“You can help me plant traps” she finally said, “but that’s it! I will not bring you on the hunt.” she continued, emphasizing the word “not” with the harshest voice she could produce. The boys face lit up and that stupid smile returned to his face. “Do I make myself clear?” she almost shouted at him.

Barely able to contain his excitement he started nodding, first slowly, then vigorously. "Yes, yes of course mam" he replied trying, and failing, to contain his excitement.

She took a moment to inspect him. He was skinny, short and - judging from his clothes - clearly very poor. "What is your name, boy?" she asked, doing her best imitation of her old drill sergeant from back in the chapel.

"Peter" he replied with regained confidence. "Alright then, Peter, follow." She said as she turned, and left out the front door followed closely by her new ward and Ruffles.

A few hours later Diona stood in a small clearing deep in the Pinewood Forest bordering the small village. The cool autumn winds brushed against her face. It made the loose strands of hair - that never quite seemed to fit in the otherwise tight braid - dance around her head. With her eyes closed she took in the fresh late afternoon air, enjoying the serene silence of nature.

"But I don't understand, why are we hunting the werewolf while the sun is still up?" Peter was carrying a heavy bag with all her gear. His clumsy feet mashed through the forest underbrush with a crackling commotion.

Torn from her moment of peace, she sighed heavily rolling her eyes into the back of her head.

Peter joined her, fumbling with a long rope and continued “I thought they only came out at night?”

Diona turned to face him, “I thought I made it very clear that we are not hunting anything” she said as she helped him sort out the rope. “I will be hunting the wolf, while you will be safe in your bed” she clarified, grabbing a big metal bear trap dangling from Peters hip. “Give me that, before you hurt yourself. Besides, I want to scout the area before I go hunting this beast in its own backyard” she continued while she loaded one of her crossbows with a small metal bolt, adorned with dark red feathers.

“How big do you think it is?” Peter enquired, staring in between the crooked trees that formed the forest surrounding them. Diona noted the low autumn sun flickering through the branches. Dusk would be upon them soon. Better hurry.

“Are you even listening to a word I’m saying?” she asked without much hope of hearing a sensible reply. “Give me the meat” she ordered unfolding the big bear trap with a metallic screech.

Peter frantically searched for a brief moment in the bag, before finding the leg of the deer Diona had felled less than an hour ago. Bringing it over to her, he searched her face inquisitively. “Do you think you will kill it tonight?” he asked, his words so quiet Diona almost didn’t hear him.

Small trickles of blood still dripped off the fresh meat as she accepted it, "If everything goes to plan, yes." she said somberly.

They stared at each other for a little while before Peter resolutely nodded; "Great!" was all he said.

Diona placed the deer meat in the bear trap and covered the metal jaws with leaves. Studying her handiwork, she stepped back from the trap and gave a satisfied grunt.

Ruffles who had been jumping around in some leaves suddenly stopped and perked it's ears. A long winded howl broke the silence around them, making Peter jolt upright with a nervous look on his face.

"Alright, time to go boy!" Diona said. The wolf was out earlier than she'd expected, but then again the moon had been up for a few hours now and the sun was cussing the edge of the horizon.

"But I can help, I- I can.." Peter started.

"Go! Now!" Diona interrupted, her voice brokering no room for debate. She stepped back and swiped her foot across the ground a couple times to erase any obvious hints of their presence in the area.

Noticing that Peter hadn't moved she pointed a crossbow directly at him. "If you do not leave this instance, I will fell you myself" she said harshly. Ruffles barked at him as if to punctuate her words. There was no time for games, things

had just taken a very serious turn. Peter's eyes widened, clearly caught off guard by Dionas sudden change of demeanor.

"Ye- yes mam" he stammered as he started backing away. "Good luck" he added, looking back at her one last time, before he took off running towards town.

Diona surveyed the scene a final time, before finding her hiding place behind a large tree, upwind from the majority of her traps. Checking her weapons and gear to make sure everything was ready and in order, she spoke quietly and calmly to Ruffles. "I'm going to need you to be quiet now, alright boy" she said. Ruffles happily agreed with a light bark and a wagging tail. She looked intensely at the young pup and raised her hand with two fingers stretched out. "Sit." she lowered her hand toward Ruffles. The dog quickly sat down with its full attention directed toward Diona. "Quiet!" she reiterated as she balled her fingers into a fist. They had trained these signals for a few weeks now, but Ruffles was still a young pup and this was his first real mission. Diona could only hope that the dog would behave as trained, for her full attention had to be on the beast from now on. She leaned back against the large tree and focused all her senses on the little clearing. Breathing slowly, she tried to force her heartbeat to remain calm.

A long while went by without a sound and she could feel Ruffles starting to move around restlessly. Diona quietly got the dogs attention and went through the hand motions again.

Ruffles obediently sat down, tilting its head while it looked at her. *Good boy* Diona thought, smiling to herself, when she heard it. Something big was moving around in the clearing beyond the tree. She could hear its soft but heavy footsteps, and its ragged breathing. Holding her breath she listened carefully; trying to track its movement purely through sound, as everything went quiet again.

Suddenly a sharp whiney screech filled the air followed by a forceful metallic clank as the bear trap triggered with a violent jerk.

Smiling to herself Diona swung around the tree, both crossbows trained at the place where the bear trap was placed. But there was no foul beast of the night caught in the trap, only a small, dark haired wolf pup. Licking at the deer leg, the dog was small enough that the jaws of the huge trap had slammed together around it without hurting it.

“Ruffles” Diona exhaled, caught somewhere between surprise and disappointment. Immediately her hunter’s instincts kicked in as the gravity of the situation became clear to her. She spun around just in time to see a dark shadow pouncing at her from behind.

Diona dodged with all the speed she could muster, letting herself drop to the ground while she fired both hand crossbows directly at the werewolf. Everything was moving so fast she couldn’t tell if any of the bolts hit the mark.

As soon as she hit the ground she tucked her shoulder under her and used the momentum of the fall to roll across the clearing, smoothly getting back to her feet. Her hat lay in the middle of the clearing and her braid whipped around her

as she swung her head back and forth. *Where was the wolf? How did it vanish that fast?*

Not wasting time, Diona reloaded her crossbows while Ruffles barked at the dark forest.

Heart pounding, her eyes darted around the clearing. The only trace of the wolf's presence was a cut in her coat where its claws had raked her. She could feel blood running down her back, but there was no time to check. She could hear snarling as the beast moved around in the shadows, just beyond where the dull blue moonlight could reach. Every now and then she thought she caught a glimpse of a pair of yellow eyes staring back at her, but never for long.

In a sudden burst of movement a silhouette broke the treeline and ran into the middle of the clearing. Diona almost fired at it before she recognized Peter. He was flailing a large tree branch and screaming wildly. "Come on you dumb dog!" he challenged through tears.

Oh no, was all Diona had time to think, as the wolf jumped from the shadows, sprinting directly at Peter. The large beast was in front of him before the boy even registered what was happening. It lashed at him with one of its large, clawed hands, launching him back towards Diona.

She noticed that one of the werewolves giant paws stood planted right in the rope noose trap she had laid out earlier. She hadn't had time to finish the trap so the other end of the rope just lay in the middle of the clearing.

Diona threw herself forward, diving onto one knee as she unloaded her crossbows at the monster, both bolts striking true this time. One impaled a forearm; the other pierced deep in between two ribs. Dropping both crossbows to the

ground, Diona spun using her knee as a pivot. In a single smooth motion she drew and threw a slim silver knife directly at its head, using the momentum of the spin as she came back around to face the wolf.

The knife flew right in front of the wolf's head, barely missing it, and hit a tree behind it with a thunk. It didn't matter, she had just needed the wolf to stay in place. With the other hand she grabbed the end of the rope, yanking with all of her might, and pulled the wolf off balance as the noose tightened around its ankle.

She would never be able to hold the much larger creature, but if she could confuse it she might have a chance to regain control of the situation.

The wolf snarled wildly at Peter who lay a few feet ahead, but before it could attack him again Ruffles cut it off. The little diminutive dog placed itself in between the enormous wolf and the whimpering boy, barking at the huge creature with no fear. The wolf stepped forward and roared at Ruffles, who seemed unphased in the presence of the terrifying creature.

Diona flung another knife at the wolf, this one burying itself in the beast's chest all the way to the hilt. The creature whimpered and drew back, clearly hurt by this blow. Diona stared intently at the wolf. That had been her last weapon; she was defenceless now. Luckily the wolf knew nothing of this. It roared one last time before it ran off into the night, bleeding profusely from the wound the silver knife had cut into its chest.

Diona stood completely still in the clearing for a moment. Her heart was pounding and blood was rushing to her ears,

blocking out the sounds of Peter whimpering and Ruffles barking.

She sat down unceremoniously in the clearing next to her hat, staring into the trees where the beast had run. "Too close." she muttered to herself. "Way too close".

After a few moments the scene calmed. Ruffles stopped barking, Peter's whimpers became slight moaning and Dionas heart gradually slowed down.

"Are you all right?" She asked at length, grabbing her hat and began to rise to her feet.

"I- I think so" Peter said unsurely, revealing an arm with long red lashes from where the claw had hit him.

Diona inspected it briefly. "You'll be fine" she said, replacing the hat on her head. "Those cuts aren't very deep. You got lucky". She walked to the tree where her silver knife still protruded, and pulled it out.

"I'm sorry" Peter said, voice dripping with shame. "It's my fault it got away."

"You should be sorry!" Diona barked harshly. "For almost getting yourself killed, and taking me and Ruffles with you!" she berated him as she picked up her crossbows from the ground.

The boy grimaced at the harshness of her words.

"But..." Diona continued "It did not get away." She knelt down by a pool of blood at the edge of the clearing.

"I have a trail now." she said, inspecting the crimson on her

gloved fingertips.

In the distance they heard a haunting, drawn out howl, sending shivers down their spines. Diona looked calmly in the direction of the howl but snapped to attention as it was quickly echoed by another. And then another. A fourth howl responded from the North, just as a fifth chimed in from the East.

“We have to get out of here.” Diona said with a tone that did nothing to hide her sudden trepidation at the situation. And in that moment Ruffles’ decided to joined the choir.