

Hunter Hunted

It was an especially harsh summer harvest for the village folk living near the forested swathes of mountainous terrain that made up the uncharted wilderness beyond whatever mankind had already explored and conquered. With an unnatural cold blowing down from the vast mountaintops above making crop growth impossible alongside the knee high snow that would cake the ground after every night, the settlers were at their wits end, with some contemplating on returning to the safety of land closer to the Empire's capital after being convinced that something clearly didn't want them here.

The first indicator had been the chill and snowfall when there clearly hadn't been any when they'd first come across the fertile land. The second and by far most dangerous of all, had been the disappearances amongst the already small population of villagers. Kidnappers, wild beasts, gone astray in the depths of the forest, many speculations were had about the fate of these missing individuals, but one thing was certainly clear; something knew they were here and it wanted them all gone.

But of course, there was another side in the group that simply believed it all to be coincidence, that if they persevered, they would finally be able to settle and plow the lands for their own. Casting aside the superstitious folk, as they had come to label those who believed otherwise, and their doubts, with a handful of them packing up and making for home, the foolish endeavour of conquering the forces of nature free from their minds.

To those who still remained alongside their families and friends however, the fact still remained that they were sorely in need of food with what little fruits and wheat they had in stock now being rationed amongst their number.

"I've seen boar in the woods over yonder, fat and ripe with meat! If we could get a huntin' party together, we'll be eatin' well tonight!"

Those were the words Timothy, a farmhand, had spoken early on that cold morning with a glimmer of excitement in his eyes rousing the hearts of the other able bodied men that took hope in a steaming slice of meat on their plates that evening.

It didn't take much afterwards to get a small group of volunteers together, armed with swords, axes and spears and geared up in leather militia-esque armor in case something unexpected occurred. Thinking back to the disappearances that still went unresolved. If something or someone thought to sneak up on them, they'd be ready, setting off into the thick daunting grey woods with snow and foliage crunching in their wake as they dragged a heavy sled meant for the haul they hoped to find within the forest.

Unaware of the fate that awaited them all on the other side, and that none of them would ever be able to see the faces of those they left behind...

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A few hours into the hunt, and the party had already gathered a hefty pile of animals ranging from the fabled boar in Timothy's tales to tender rabbits with which they could skin for warm pelt that could serve well as material for coats. Just a bit more and they'd have enough to keep everyone well fed for the next few weeks.

"Hah! These things make for some fancy trinke-"

That was when the first strike hit the group, silencing the loudmouth midway through his excited remarks about the armlet he had fashioned for himself with a chipped tusk from a boar, falling face first onto the forest floor with a strange dart tipped with a radiant flair of multicolored feathers. It didn't take long for the others to break into panic and chaos, with some other guy struggling to lift Timothy's body to safety, unsure if he was still alive or not, before he too is struck with a dart, collapsing under Timothy's weight into a comatose state.

It didn't take long for the amateurs in the group to fall victim to the precise hail of darts with the veterans immediately taking off in the opposite direction they had come from after realizing that the attack was coming from all sides. They had been surrounded for a long time, maybe even from the moment they had set foot here. Add together the fact that most of the men had been left exhausted after chasing down animals and hauling the larger bodies around, and they were in no condition to fight.

While they were busy hunting animals and revelling in the excitement of having something to eat and supplies to utilize deep in the woods, something else had been following them in the shadows with the intent of reminding the hunting party of the dangers that had slipped their mind.

By the time the sun was beginning to crest back over the cruel mountaintops, the pained shouts and panicked cries of the rapidly dwindling ranks in the party as they fell one by one to their unseen foes had already died down, with one last man standing sprinting through the trees and staying relatively calm, pressing his back up against the trunks as he quickly darts from cover to cover, keeping his trusty axe slung on his back with the wicked head serving as cover for his exposed neckline.

A seasoned warrior who had once served in the Empire, *Bertolt* had been a part of the settlers moving out to the frontier with the intent of forgetting his past life of bloodshed and warfare. And he had hope in his heart that the pristine grasslands and overgrown forest untouched by man would be his refuge, free to live as he pleased away from a king that wanted him to shed blood in endless war.



But here he was, on the run from an unknown, unseen enemy with his back against the wall and the hunting party devastated, he had lost track of the other men so he had to assume that he was the last member alive. Timothy and the rest, he grits his teeth while thinking of them and what he would say to the others back at the village.

Taking one deep breath however, Bertolt stands still behind the trunk of a large tree, holding it in as he listens carefully; nothing. Nothing besides the steady blow of the wind against the foliage, no crack of leaves underfoot or branches being disturbed from up high. Taking the chance, Bertolt slips his head out from cover, inspecting the hillside he had run down from to find no one in pursuit, his comrades nowhere in sight. But this was a wasted trip. If he returned back to the main group without anything to show for it, the loss of the others would've been for nothing.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Bertolt slips out fully into the open before taking to a knee, crawling on his belly back up the hillside with his cape covering his exposed arms and the axe still protecting his neck, praying to the Gods for their blessings as he makes his way toward the abandoned cart the group had been hauling before the attack had scattered them. While he may have been a warrior, guerilla tactics like hiding in the trees and using primitive, yet effective weapons like blow darts was unfamiliar territory for him. He was used to fighting in the open, weapons drawn against an enemy he could size up, not against shadows.

But he didn't let that hesitation hold him back, crawling on before realising something strange; the bodies of the men weren't there anymore. With their locations ingrained in Bertolt's photographic memory lying empty and spotless with the exception of weapons and gear lying discarded, as if their captors had no interest in anything but the men who wore them. But were they still alive? Incapacitated for torture or worse? He couldn't tell, not with the importance of the task at hand weighing on Bertolt's mind as he crested the hill, peering slowly back to where the cart lay unguarded, its stock lying untouched...

That was when he noticed one of the boars having been moved onto the floor, its hulking mass shifting with the soft sounds of a knife slicing through tough hide, flesh and bone, crawling around the other side to see a strange individual crouched over on the forest floor, her lean athletic figure covered in oily tanned skin glistening in the dying sunlight, tribal markings of a design he'd never seen before scrawled all over her body.

Most striking of all however, was her hair; done up into a rough ponytail held together by red string and colored a bright cyan green with pointy ears reminiscent of the Elves with fleshy nubs that harkened back to the proud warrior race of Orcs. If Bertolt didn't know better he might've assumed her to be a half-breed of sorts.

But that wasn't what Bertolt was concerned about with his eyes struggling to keep away from the woman's more...appealing aspects, as he watched her dissect the boar with an expressionless look on her face as if she'd done this many times over already.

'What sort of people had their women dressed like harlots in a seditious brothel?' Were the words currently on the warrior's mind as he studied the young girl. She couldn't have been any older than 20 and yet all she had on her was a small strap of cloth for a top and a ridiculous string held up by ropes as they cinched around her sturdy hips while riding up tight between her firm ass cheeks, her privates clearly visible against the fabric with a lush bush of pubes running up the smooth incline beneath her hardened belly.

That was when she immediately rose to full height in the blink of an eye, the chiselled bone blade she had been using to cut apart the animal held tight in her grip, the lean ridge of her nose rising and falling like a dog catching the scent of prey in the wind as she scans her surroundings with those bright orange eyes of hers. Had she detected him? But he hadn't made a noise, he was sure of it.

Despite his own assurances however, Bertolt knew the jig was up the instant the girl's sights landed in his general direction before a wide smile breaks her stern demeanour, almost as if she was happy to see the outsider lying prone on the ground watching her as she fingers her lips in excitement.



-CONTINUED OVER ON THE PATREON-