

No Mercy for Monsters

Day 1 of The Hunt

Given the cleverness of The Beast, I wholly expected to spend weeks in the tracking, but much to my surprise I find its trail swiftly and without significant issue. Was it too swift? I can only hope that it's the hand of fate, rather than the machinations of the creature, that has given me this gift. Or perhaps it is mother and father guiding me yet again?

Day 2 of the Hunt

The mist in the valley and the pain in my shoulder transport me back to the day when I saved a chick who had fallen from its nest. She was there—she was always there. And, on the return to the village with her, a thick mist filtered from the surrounding woods. It obscured our path and while we couldn't make out anything in its shadows, we knew we were not alone. Eyes watched us and our breaths shallowed in unison. What rings loudest in my mind is not what we talked about on our journey home but the resounding lack of words exchanged. Nothing reached our ears but our breathing in tandem.

Day 5 of the Hunt

I clutch my axe in my left hand as I force my body between the flat planes of two enormous rock faces. I can feel the beat of my heart in my chest, holding my breath in an attempt to calm my anxieties. And that's when I feel it. The heat of the axe's handle in my hand.

I look down to watch the blade sear red and the fated omen etched into its reflective surface. The eye of The Beast with its pupil of pure lightning. I try not to remember how she, too, saw this omen. And how The Beast made quick work to turn her.

The heat subsided and all that remained were the omen and the sweat from my white-knuckle grip. The only other times I felt so hesitant to wield this blade were that fateful day and once before when I was younger. Those cubs probably didn't deserve to meet such a bloody end, either.

But, as my mother had told me. "No mercy for monsters."

The Beast prowls above me. I will show it no mercy and it will pay.

Day 6 of the Hunt

Water rushes below my feet as I crouch to uncover a woodsman's cache marked by a mostly-toppled cairn. In it, I find a silver dagger, a pendant, and a waterlogged parchment. I

can barely make out the hastily-written words “May your hunt be more successful than mine.”

I pull my own silver dagger from its sheath. They’re identical in so many ways; many of our villagers have the same dagger. I received it upon completing my third hunt, which signified my becoming a true woodsman and allowed me to join others on the hunt—to hunt alongside her.

The dagger pulls at my memories, but it’s the glint of the pendant that catches my eyes. It was hers; there is no mistaking. As I pry it open, my suspicions are confirmed. The small tear of fabric inside is worn and the color has faded, but it is mine. She had kept this memento until the end.

Day 8 of the Hunt

The call and response of birds flitting through the forest captures my attention; my father had an uncanny ability to mimic their song. I remember how he joined me on my first hunt and how he taught me to differentiate between the trill of cheerful chittering from that of terrified calls. This was the latter.

My eyes glanced up to see a plume of smoke channeling its way over a thick forest of firs. I navigate quietly to its source and become witness to the savage defeat of three hunters and a dozen—maybe more—of their hounds. Their carcasses were scattered among the carnage of their belongings.

Once again I feel eyes watching. Across the placid lake she sits on her haunches. Palpitations in my chest freeze me to where I stand. Everything about The Beast is beautiful in this moment; a jarring juxtaposition to the brutality at my feet. Our eyes lock and I see something in them I’ve never seen before. She affords me just a moment of mercy before she turns and disappears into the grass and violets behind her.

Day 13 of the Hunt

The smell of fire draws me to a small clearing as twilight falls upon the woods. At its source is a small campfire where an older man with a balding crown and graying beard stokes its dying flame. While his name escapes me, the memory of his corpse—ravaged by the claws of The Beast—is clear in my mind. The last time I saw him, his body was shrouded in the flames that engulfed his funeral pyre. I know I should not believe everything I see, but it is hard to not take the surreal image of the man who hunted with my father decades ago as truth when he crouches before me. What can I do but join him?

So I sit upon a fallen log, I share with him a meal, and I allow him to regale me in the tales of the hunts my father had spoken of so many times before. As I listen, I hold each silver

dagger in my palms. I use the blade of one to carve away at the wooden handle of the other. As the elderly man tells me stories of my father, I remember how my mother taught me how to whittle; how she said it helps a woodsman keep their mind clear. I absentmindedly shave splinters of the dagger's handle until a shape forms beneath my calloused fingers; a wolf. My hand slips and with it goes a fang from its snarling maw. Much the same as The Beast. My mind is all but clear.

I cover the carved wolf in the swathe of material that I've kept at my hip. It felt fitting to blanket this trinket in the torn fabric that once wrapped around her shoulders. Her scent still clung to its threads; the faint smell of raspberries from the many times we gathered them in baskets for the village.

It's been days since I locked eyes with The Beast from across the pond. It feels like the scent on this tattered cloak is the only trail of her that still remains. The haunting illusion of the long-dead man tending to the campfire's coals only further seals the promises I left broken to my people. I was alone and as tears burned trails down my cheeks, so did the sky open up and rain began to fall.

Day 15 of the Hunt

Wisps of smoke curl up from the skeletal huts that teeter precariously in the breeze. The traitors who sheltered her will not come back to so much as kindling as I raise my axe against the remaining support beams and the sharp blade of my fury cuts them to the ground. The monstrous urge to see every remnant topple surges through my veins.

At the peak of my rage I catch a glance of my reflection in a pool of water gathered from the recent storm and for a moment I see her face and the lightning in her eyes.

Day 18 of the Hunt

Ten days have passed since any indication that I am still on the right trail, but this is unmistakably her work. I can't help but think she fell this beast on the path to mock me—to let me know she hasn't lost my scent. The kill is fresh, steam still rising from the gaping wound in its chest. I dip down and, with the wolf-hilted dagger, carve a slice of meat from the carcass. I'm overwhelmed by the smell of copper and the taste of revenge.

I cook the elk meat over a small fire in an abandoned cabin I discover on the edge of the treeline. Fat droplets of rain pound on the wooden shelter and drip through the cracks of its stacked logs as a torrential downpour relentlessly falls outside. Lightning streaks the sky and rolling thunder grows ever nearer in the distance.

This storm is unlikely to pass anytime soon and so I must wait. I will lose the trail again but I know she is near and that she is watching. Her proximity does nothing to abate my loneliness and her toying nature only increases the frustration bubbling within me.

I yearn for the warmth of my home's hearth and the comfort of the furs I abandoned on my cot. How long has it been now since I left home? Surely only weeks have passed but it feels like a lifetime since I saw the furrowed brows on the faces of my people as they turned me to The Hunt.

Day 19 of the Hunt

The moon is bright tonight, so bright and oppressive that its light weighs on me like the noonday sun. My heart pounds and my head throbs, but I must make my way to camp at all costs. The exhaustion in my body makes my footfalls heavy and unable to react when the root of a large oak snakes beneath me and causes me to stumble forward. I catch myself with hands and knees just above the surface of a murky puddle.

Eclipsing the light of the moon, I see her silhouette in its reflection, rippling with droplets of rain. Her maw opens and I swear in her voice that I hear my name. Before I can comprehend, a mighty paw with sharpened claws disturbs the water and reaches through, slashing in my direction. All I can do is roll out of the way, inadvertently flinging myself off a ravine and tumbling down its slope. The world goes black.

I come to with a muffled ringing in my ears. As my mind clears, the sound sharpens; a hunting horn bellowing in the distance. The pace of my heart quickens and I feel an indescribable pull toward it, even though I'm certain danger resides at its source.

Day 21 of the Hunt

Was it the sound of a horn or the howling of a wolf—of a beast? Thinking back on it, it's hard to remember it clearly. But these marks are no mirage, no hallucination. Deep scars in the surface of the tree's bark are an unmistakable marring of your creation. The ever reminder that you are still here. This sign was only compounded by the disheartening but unsurprising sight of the broken pile of my traps haphazardly strewn just outside my tent.

I admit that while I still have fight left, that the desire is waning.

Sleep did not come easy to me; it hasn't for at least a week now. But I did dream. I dreamt of her and the single night we spent in each other's arms. But the warmth of her exhale felt too real. Too hot. I startled awake to find no evidence of her or you. Just the dewy condensation of breath that did not come from my lungs.

Day 22 of the Hunt

The pitch blackness of the moonless sky does nothing for my wandering mind. With not so much as even a shadow to distract my eyes, I can't help but think what you might be doing on this very night. This darkness would never hinder a Beast like you. Do you prowl the glade for your next victim or do you wait not far away, watching where I sleep?

Once again, sleep does overtake me. But the dreams that haunt me are even worse, if one could even imagine. I see your gnashing teeth, hear the terror in villager's screams, and feel my hesitation as your emerald eyes stare deeply into me. An image that will forever be burned into my mind.

Day 25 of the Hunt

Two days of climbing and my limbs are tired, my fingertips growing numb from the ragged rocks. I cannot see the light I spotted those two days ago from this vantage point, but I must know its source. To regain some strength, I gnaw into the last of the jerky dried from the elk you overtook.

My eyes glaze over as my jaw grinds the tough meat and I think back to the day we met. I often consider the events of this day and what they would eventually mean for both of us. If only that day never happened, neither of us would be in this predicament.

But that's not how things went. And now I heed the call of the creed and hear my father's voice: "No mercy for monsters."

Hopefully the summit of this hill is not much further.

Day 26 of the Hunt

I've made it to the top of this hill but I've found nothing of note. Was this just another hallucination or are you out here playing tricks on me? I suppose both could be true.

My eyes glance down at the valley below; a herd of deer graze lazily in the morning mist. They are impossibly small at this distance, but I can still make out one doe lifting her head and...and she looks right at me. Through me? She shouldn't be able to see me from this far away, especially not with how I am camouflaged by the overgrowth. I cannot tear my eyes away from her in the same way she cannot break her gaze on me.

Day 30 of the Hunt

Dehydration is setting in. Carrying my packs would only increase levels of exhaustion, so I set off toward the stream that I know is not too far to fill my waterskin. But I fear I may have

taken a left when I meant to take a right. Was I supposed to follow the setting sun or seek its rising rays?

And that's when I hear your howl. It's much closer than I could have imagined. Panic sets in and my eyes dart in every direction to try to catch a glimpse of your ashen fur or the pearly white of your befanged muzzle.

Instead I hear a loud crashing as branches above me snap at the weight of something dropping seemingly from the sky. My hands instinctively reach out to catch it as it tumbles ungracefully through the limbs of the trees. A doll with dirt smudged on her faded face and a splattering of blood across her torn dress.

I'd seen this doll once, maybe twice before. I recall back to a winter of our youth when your sister lay frozen on the ground, cradling her arm to her chest. Her eyes were vacant and the snow beneath her was stained in red. Woodsmen spoke in hushed whispers over her body, my parents included. I looked up to see you through the throng of villagers. Fear in your eyes, you clutched this doll that your sister had once held in her arms.

Day 31 of the Hunt

Terror still poisons my veins but a day of sleep brings some clarity and I'm able to locate the path more easily to the stream. I desperately fill the waterskin and upend its contents to sate my thirst. The flood of water tastes of blood and the nearby foliage smells of death. I cannot help but spew it back onto the dirt and retch into the weeds. I fill my waterskin again in the hopes of being able to filter it back at camp.

As I clasp the waterskin back to my pack, I take stock of my gear. I've collected many trinkets and memories over the last weeks of The Hunt. The silver dagger, locket, parchment, and the doll. As well as the visceral memory of how this game of cat and mouse started and how the mouse has seemingly become a wolf while the cat remains the same. As I ponder this, that's when I see it. At the bottom of my pack, a hint of white catches my eye. A tooth—no, a fang. A large canine. My stomach turns and I would have heaved if I hadn't already left its contents in the cattails.

I know I must be close to you, although I suppose I always have been. You were always there and you still are. Just like tonight, the moon is high in the sky and I see you there atop the pronounced cliff edge. I can feel your howl in my marrow; the fear causing me to misstep. It's too late to react when I hear the familiar click of a trap gone off and feel the fangs of rusted metal grasp tightly around my ankle. I let out a howl of my own as I make futile attempts to wrench its grip from my boot.

Day 32 of the Hunt

I plunge into the cold stream and clean the wound the trap caused. For not the first time of this Hunt I catch sight of my reflection.

Whose gaze stares back at me? Was this all worth it? Does appeasing my parents and following the creed make up for how I've changed? What would a younger me say to who I've become. What would she have said? What would she have wanted me to do?

Instead of answers, I only see how my features have become more like yours. How my eyes are alight with pain and how the many scars that mark my flesh are tributes to the torment.

Day 35 of the Hunt

The rays of the afternoon sun shine down upon a monolith in the field as if guiding me to it with their light. I place a hand upon its smooth rock face and see the depictions of your siblings turned from man to monster. My fingers get lost in the large clawed paw print painted there with blood.

A flash of light dashes through my periphery and without hesitation I loose my axe in its direction. A moist thud confirms its found purchase. My pulse heightens and only quells when I walk toward the target and see it is not you but the feathered remains of a vulture. Beneath it lies the amputated haunch of a deer that must have attracted the bird.

My stomach growls with the reminder of my lack of rations. Had you left this for me?

Day 37 of the Hunt

Rain pours down and I'm once again stuck at camp and left to my own devices. As I look through the curtains of the unrelenting water, I am reminded of the day I swore the oath. It rained that day, too, and so many villagers opted to watch from under the overhangs of their huts.

But not her. She was there beside my parents, soaked to the bone, hanging on every word as I recited the creed.

Day 38 of the Hunt

The trap worked. You finally lay before me, caught in silvered teeth and chains. You look at me with wild, nearly pleading eyes, a low growl rumbling from your heaving chest. I can barely hear it over the roaring of blood in my ears. Overcome, I lunge toward you with my axe clutched in sweating hands.

You roll swiftly to the side and I miss, striking the trap—freeing you and leaving me off-kilter.

All I see then is the white of your teeth, all I feel is the warmth of my trickling blood, and then blackness.

I awake a new woman. You showed no mercy for the monster I had become.