

HUNTER, HAUNTED

Chapter 7

Where is it? All I can see are trees. Of course there are trees, it's a forest, but there should be something else, too.

Trees. Evergreen trees, their branches spreading above me and swaying in the wind that howls with a hound's voice. They almost seem like they're reaching for me, wiggling their dull green needles like spider legs, eager to get their claws on me to do who knows what.

Up in the sky, in the few spots where the fuzzy blanket of the branches doesn't cover it, the black of night peeks through. In a few of those breaches, tiny stars twinkle. In this scarce light, I can barely see three meters ahead until the surroundings are swallowed up by the unending darkness. Why didn't I do this during the day? I guess I just need to follow this path of bare ground and growlithe-orange dead needles until I eventually bump into it.

Oh, speak of the sneasel.

Out of the black, a gray stone wall has emerged right before me. Aside from the smooth, cuboid rocks that have been tightly piled on each other to form it and a large, gaping rectangular entrance, the wall is featureless. Still, it seems very old... ancient, even.

I step towards the entrance. A bird call startles me at that second, making me flinch. But it's just a bird. If anything, it's good company. It means there are no dangerous mon around here.

Even though the still, silent darkness awaiting beyond the entrance is unsettling, I gather my courage and enter. My steps become louder, the terrain beneath them having changed from thump-smothering dirt to clean rock. The echoes caused by the enclosed space factor in the volume, too.

I continue on, the light of the outside - what little there was - growing more and more distant. Soon, it disappears completely. Actually, I've... walked quite far and come across nothing, so maybe I should --

Thump.

The sudden, faraway noise reverberates around the hall as the earth lightly quakes from its force. My back is struck with chills comparable to a brush of an articuno's tail feather. What kind of man or mon would make that noise? It sounded more like a machine...

Should I go on? Should I run for my life? Where even is the exit? Does it exist anymore? I look around, twirling to keep an eye on every direction. No light, no light to be seen... wait, there!

I run for the light, though still attempting somehow to stay quiet. I can't know what the darkness hides here.

I approach it, it grows bigger, brighter... was the outside really that bright? Has the day already come? Have I been here that long? I slow down my pace, cold suspicion grasping my brainstem...

The light is golden, shining brightly. Upon a closer look, I can see something in the center. A door...? A coffin-shaped one? No... it is a coffin.

A coffin made of sparkling gold, decorated with blue gemstone, a mask at head-height. The mask has a human face, I can tell that much, but it looks blurry. Still familiar... is it --

Oh fuck. Not her again.

I thought I killed her, got rid of her for good -- what right does she have to be alive again? What god has chosen her as their pet, bringing her back again and again? Or did they choose *me* as their little plaything, ragdoll to throw around and mock? I bet they're laughing right now, thinking they're so funny, just like any lowly mortal while I'm here being more divine they could ever hope to be --

Thump.

It... came from the coffin. It shook with that thump.

Thump. Thump.

Clank!

The coffin's lid has flown open, exposing the empty space within - it's lined with crimson velvet, but that's not what's interesting, as the lid... the lid's inside has thousands, thousands of needles sticking out, metal and sharp.

I realize what it means.

Away. I need to get away *now*.

Thump.

The coffin has moved closer by a meter. I really, really, really need to run now. I turn around and leap into a sprint. I don't know what to run towards - I can't see anything but darkness - but it's not like I can stay where I am.

Thump.

I want to look back, see how far it got this time, but I can't do so, it would just slow me down --

Thump.

It's getting more frequent. It's getting faster! Fucking run!

Thump. Thump. Thump...

Strings of black, somehow even darker than the darkness around them, slither into the edges of my field of vision. I try to go faster, but no, I'm already going as fast as my legs can take me. The strings weave together into ropes, loose hairs at their ends twitching like antennae. I'm running, running, my lungs sting and my mouth is dry, how are they keeping up with me, how are they advancing even further, slowly but surely, like this was no trouble to them and they were just toying with me... thump, thump, thump, the coffin is still following behind, the thumping is louder and louder, so loud it hurts --

A sharp pain in my left shin shocks my body, so hard that for just a moment, I forget how to run and I'm flung down onto my arms and chest. I have to get up, but the pain still tugs at my leg, as if I was bound. And I am bound - a quick look confirms that one of the strands has coiled around my leg, digging into my pant leg and flesh like barbed wire. Blood has stained the fabric and is dripping onto the stone below. The loop tightens, pressing all the way down to the bone with searing, unbearable agony. Everything below the wound has gone numb. That limb is a goner, I need to abandon it.

Even if it's painful, so fucking painful, I try to drag myself onward on the field of gray slabs, but my nails and fingers slip every time. Before I can even attempt getting up, another ring of pain captures my left wrist, then another my right wrist, my right shin, my ribcage. I flail, but all it does is amplify the pain to thousandfold.

The strings begin to pull me back, back towards the golden light. I know what's coming, but I still wish, still pray I'll be wrong. But there it appears, as the light has grown blinding - the needle-coated door, the crimson walls of the coffin's inside. The bottom hits my back - at least it's soft, but what fucking comfort is that when what's about to happen is about to happen?

The lid creaks closer. The thumping has ceased. The pain from the strings has gone, but they're still there, holding me in place.

The needles glimmer in the light. Pure and shiny, one last time before...

As if with a kick, the lid is slammed onto me. Every needle, each and every one, they puncture my skin, eyes, teeth, rip through the flesh and crush the bone as instinct tears one final, ear-splitting scream from my bleeding lungs.

Pain. Purest pain ever felt. Every nerve blaring at the brain of the hell brought upon to the body, unobstructed by any other signals as I go blind and deaf.

Then - no pain.

Only black, empty, silent, cold, wet. Any darkness from before - nothing compared to this. Am I... dead? Is this the afterlife?

Will it be like this forever?

Thump, thump, thump, thump --

No, this isn't nothingness, the coffin is still here!

A hole is ripped in the darkness, golden light shines in, it's coming for me again!

"Red?"

That's human speech...? There's a human figure in that light...?

And where I am, it's not empty. Something's beneath me. Soft. It warms my hands. And my heart beats. If I have a heartbeat, I live. I have my body. So where am I?

Oh.

Quickly, I hide my left arm behind me. He can't see the bandage.

"What happened?" the figure asks, shaggy hair hanging in front of its eyes. The absence of its glasses, as always, makes his eyes seem weirdly small. Abe.

I take a moment to catch my breath, joyously discovering my lungs to be intact and well.

"Just a nightmare," I respond. "Nothing more."

“...You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Reluctantly, the boy in the door frame backs away and pushes the door shut.

“Goodnight...” he still says from outside, then leaves for his own room with quiet steps as I remain still in the dark.

I pull my left arm away from hiding and sigh. As the exhaled air hits my bare chest, I realize how covered in cold sweat I am. My heart still beats at record pace. Otherwise, though, I seem to be fine.

Damn it. Fuck that Joanna. I'd like to move on already. That coffin in my dream, it was obviously a cofagrigus, that evolved form of yamask. It looked like one, it lived in what looked like a tomb...

And the scream I let out, I can't seem to stop thinking about it... It was nothing like the screams I'd heard, there was nothing beautiful about it. It wasn't the wail of a woman as she's made to bleed in the most elegant of ways, it was the yawp of a mangy, old ursaring stomped to death by the hooves of a stantler he himself had attacked. Ugly, diseased, repulsive, pathetic.

But, you know, it's okay. It was just my subconscious gone wild. In real life, Joanna is gone, so is Michi, and with her, everything that points to me. I'm in the clear. Maybe washing my face and walking around a bit will calm me down, convince my brain the danger is gone.

I pry myself out of my bed, noting how my boxers have stuck to my skin with the sweat... ugh. Maybe I should sleep in the nude for the rest of the night. I exit my room and walk to the upstairs bathroom, turning on the lights. My eyes wince at the sudden flash of brightness.

The floor tiles are sticky underneath my bare feet, but soon I reach the warmer, softer carpet before the sink. I turn on the tap and begin applying lukewarm water to my face, neck and chest. Amidst washing myself, I remove my underwear and cast it onto the laundry pile. When I'm done, I dry myself off with the towel farthest away, the pecha-colored one. Oh, it's warm, fuzzy, dry... sticky... red?

That's... blood. That's blood on the towel. Where did it come from...?

I glance at the mirror above the sink to see my body, but my body - it's... red. Bloody. Full of holes. So many small, deep, black holes. Puncture wounds. No skin is left. Only torn muscle, shattered teeth, deflated eyes, dripping vitreous humour, blood, that's really bad, that's really fucking bad, I'm going to go blind, what will I do without my sight, I'll be helpless, useless -- but wait a second now, wait a fucking second, how am I still seeing this?

Oh... oh, oh, I'm still dreaming. That's obvious. The jagged mess of teeth of the reflection form into a smile. This isn't real. I must have fallen asleep again after Abe left. Haha. It's just... it's just my mind again.

I look down at my chest, the sight matching the man in the mirror. Gosh, I'm very fucked up right now. I hope that goes away soon, I don't want to have to clean this blood.

I reach my mangled hand into my chest cavity underneath my ribs, grabbing the thing that beats and pulling it out with little resistance. I hold out the organ, the disembodied heart which still pulsates, but now without blood. The torn off edges of the thick blood vessels that leave it - aorta, superior vena cava, pulmonary artery, so on - are a sad sight, as clean cuts are more beautiful. Well, what a shame. I leave it in the sink. It's certainly not going to stick to my insides anymore, so why bother trying to cram it in.

I leave the bathroom, head to my own room and climb back to my bed, hoping to sleep off the dream.

It's astounding how different things seem in the dark of night and the light of the rising sun.

Really? Chased by a coffin? Seeing a bloody, torn up face in the mirror? What am I, a ten-year-old? I'm an adult, I have nothing to fear from absurd visions like these. And there's no way that was real pain I felt. I just thought I was in pain and reacted based on that assumption, no actual suffering took place.

How stupid. I hope I have that dream again so that I can get even. After all, it's my dream, my mind. I have total control.

But for now, who cares. It's another beautiful day outside in the world where they'll never catch me for my crimes. If they do, it'll be by my choice, and then it'll be too late to try to punish me.

I leave the shining, bright window of my colorless bedroom to dress up and do the rest of my morning chores. Having brushed my teeth, I stick around in front of the sink, staring at my reflection.

From this point on, I will no longer be weak. I will become a new man. A better man.

I've said that a lot of times, haven't I? Yet I still haven't changed, clearly, if I have to say it again. My face is the same, my body is the same, even if the count of scars has risen and muscle mass fluctuated a little.

This time, I really need to stick to my promise. I can't allow myself to relapse, not gradually nor instantaneously. No situation is an exception. But I can't be overly strict, either. I'll stick to my rules, but I won't make onix out of weedle. I'll be logical, cool-headed, civil, but no less cruel than before. I will be in control.

But to avoid these remaining as only words, I need to make concrete choices as well. Visible changes in my life. Though they should mostly be visible to me alone, lest it arouse suspicion or questions.

Though, on the other hand, just a while ago I straight up stopped talking to the omanyte I couldn't stay away from for years. If anything's going to be weird, it's that - it's possible that opening up communication will ultimately calm any worries, even if it'll still likely stir things up momentarily. So, I suppose my first concrete promise would be to stop being a coward and confronting the omanyte. Fonz, too. I'd say Abe as well, but to be honest, I don't think the amount of attention I've given him has even changed at any point.

Now for the other promises...

I've skipped training a couple of times lately. I can't keep doing that. I should return to my routine today and then stick to it. It'll feel extra heavy at first, but if I keep it up, it'll return to being just another normal morning chore in no time.

Two promises. I should come up with more. Well, I can try going outside more often, improve my tolerance of people, but that's really just an extension of promise one.

Promise three, I can probably settle for three for now, so what will I change...

My eyes wander back to my reflection, his face, his features. The angular eyebrows, the smooth skin, the narrow, distant eyes, the strong jaw. Obviously, I can't change my face on a whim - if I could, hunting would be a lot easier. But the coarse black hair, the bang that always hangs between my eyes, that could do with a makeover, even if a minimal one.

I open the tap just briefly enough to rinse my fingers, then swipe back my hair. My widow's peak is exposed. More like widowmaker's peak... is what I would say, had I ever killed married men.

From the mirror cabinet, I dig out the hairbrush. It's covered in loose, chocolate brown hair - practically every tooth has a strand wrapped around it. Does Abe use this on his hair or a tangela? Ugh.

Having dried my hands, picked out the clumps of hair and dropped them in the trash, I draw my slightly wet bangs back again and brush them to keep them in place. Occasional tangles provide noticeable resistance for the strokes. Should really start using more than just my hands for combing, oh well...

By the time all of my bristly mane has been smoothly brushed back, the man in the mirror has morphed from an under-bridge raticate to a street-strutting, show-stopping ninetales. It's so odd... I guess she had a point after all. I would look more approachable if I just groomed myself a little.

Of course, approachable was the opposite of what I wanted, so that old style worked well in the past, but now... well, this is perfect. Now all I need is some fitting clothes, and a...

I give the mirror my most amiable, benevolent, tame smile.

There it is. Peak deception.

"Good morning, Abe."

The boy looks up from his breakfast cereal and the open newspaper on the kitchen table. His almond-shaped eyes look surprised, even startled. Then a reserved smile forms on his lips.

"Good morning, Red."

"Where is..."

I don't think I should say the actual name yet. Too drastic. I'll circumvent it.

"Fonz?"

"Taking Helix to school."

"They left already, did they?"

"Did you have something to say to them?"

"No, just wondering."

I step aside to the kitchen counter to prepare breakfast. Abe watches me for a while, then returns to his own business.

Today, I choose to make a good, big breakfast. I'll need a lot of energy for the workout I've planned.

"Are you going somewhere today?" asks Abe suddenly, his timidity overridden by his curiosity, it seems.

"You could say that."

"Where?"

"Outside."

"Well... yes, but where outside?"

"Don't know. Haven't decided yet."

"Oh. Well, have fun."

"I will."

Soon after, he finishes his cereal, puts away the dishes and heads off for school. As I'm left alone, an urge to switch out of my new clothing instantly arises, but I suppress it. The button shirt stays on - well, until the workout - but in any case, hoodies or t-shirts stay off.

There's no "true self" to return to anymore. This *is* my true self, and today hasn't even yet begun.

After the breakfast, the workout and a quick shower, I'm ready to depart. Dapper clothes on, head held high, scabbard on hip, I exit the house. The weather's even warmer than yesterday. The sky is bluer. Clouds puffier. I feel like what Giovanni must have felt like before I kicked his ass. If those organ traders saw me now, they'd think their boss came for a surprise visit.

Now, where to go? Somewhere with lots of people, definitely. Somewhere nice... the beach? Route 21 it is.

I navigate my way to the southward shore with the help of familiar knowledge and street signs, making sure to maintain perfect posture on every street, regardless of the amount of onlookers. The scent of the sea fills the air, then the sight of it appears in the horizon.

Numerous beach chairs, parasols and towels are scattered on the pale sand, in use of people and mon alike. Most of the humans seem to be casually dressed and chatting or playing volleyball. Only a few brave ones are trying their luck with the still quite chilly water, shivering in their swimsuits. A lot of the mon, however, aren't held back by the sea's low temperature, as proven by their playing and excited noises. The water and ice types seem to be getting the most

out of it, splashing each other and chasing wild krabby. The fire types, on the other hand, prefer to keep as far away as the grassy areas beyond the sand, watching the leaves of the surrounding birches flutter, waiting for their owners to run out of fun and return.

I step onto the wooden walkway that extends to a pier farther on, not wanting to drag my pant legs through the sand. A few clacks of my shoes against the planks later, the sight of a small, navy blue uniform at the other end of the shore stops me.

A policewoman. What is one doing here? Maybe she's looking for me? But I left no evidence...

That's right. I left no evidence. That means she can't be here for me. Or if she is, she can't do anything.

This right here - this actually a perfect opportunity. What better way to prove my calm than by confronting my worst threat face to face?

I set my course for the woman in blue and the big pile of cream-colored fuzz sitting next to her, most likely an RK9 unit. As I arrive behind them, my guess is confirmed.

The arcanine picks me up first. Its reddish ears perk up, it raises its snout in the air to sniff the new, foreign scent, then turns to me with a curious, if reserved look. The human, having noticed her partner's motion, faces me as well. Her young eyes are a grayish green. Her long auburn hair is bound in a ponyta's tail.

"Good day, officers," I greet, hands out of pockets and relaxed at my sides. Feels strange doing nothing with them. The right one keeps wanting to touch the scabbard.

"Good day to you too," says the woman, smiling, adjusting her cap. The arcanine wags its tail a little to show its agreement.

"Making sure the beach is safe?" I ask her, walking over to the railing and leaning on it.

"No, no, they've got life guards for that," she laughs. "We're just spending our break here."

I nod, then look the arcanine in its deep brown, alert eyes. Its black nostrils quiver. What are you smelling there, sweetheart? Nothing but wool? Thought so.

"Brave of a fire type to venture so close to the sea," I remark. Its expression loses a bit of kindness.

"If she wasn't brave, she wouldn't be a cop," responds the woman, ruffling her partner's neck fur, the hairs of which are long enough to cover her entire hand and more. "Ain't that right, Wendy?"

"Yeah," the man mumbles. I guess it was offended somehow? Whatever.

A second of silence passes. Another. I should say something.

"Is it busy over at your station right now?" I nearly add a question about whether they've had any specific mystery cases, but that would've been too suspicious. It's probably also something cops shouldn't discuss with civilians.

"A bit, yeah." The woman looks at the teal sea. "Have you bumped into those people walking around showing a picture of their missing relative?"

"Once, yes." She's bringing it up herself? Alright.

"We keep telling them we're doing everything we can, but I guess it's hard for them to just stand around and wait. Can't blame them for trying, even if it's very unlikely they'll get any kind of clue so late..."

"I hope they do." Because I'm a person who loves happy endings. I hope no one would ever have to suffer or die. The thinking process of a sadist absolutely eludes me.

"Either that, or that they accept defeat. It sounds cruel, but keeping alive false hope isn't good for the mind."

"I can get that."

False hope. I bet Joanna would hate for that to happen to her relatives. She'd want them to move on. She obviously isn't here anymore, so it doesn't really matter what she'd think. But I'm here.

"So... what do you think happened to her?"

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to go into that much detail."

"Oh." Aw, denied.

The cop looks at the sea again. Her profile is beautiful. Her skull shape so elegant, her skin free of wrinkles and impurities. She shouldn't be out on the field, she should be preserved in a glass case, she should be studied, taken apart, incised, and the person at the other end of the scalpel should be me --

No, Red, you must keep your calm. Slow down that pounding heart of yours. The mon next to her might sense something's off. I glance at the arcanine, Wendy or Winona or whatever its name was. Luckily, it seems to be gazing at the sea as well.

"Well, be seeing you. Have a nice break," I say, drawing their attention back to me.

"Thank you! We will!" answers the woman, grinning. The arcanine mumbles something similar, disinterested. With a wave and a nod, I leave.

What an experience. Standing on the edge of a bottomless chasm, smiling at the pit, receiving a smile in return. How easy humans are to manipulate. Is this all those politicians do? Is that what our tax money funds? Society is dumber than I thought.

Nevertheless, my first test is now behind me, and I passed with flying colors. I may have wanted to slit that bitch's pretty neck and drink her delicious blood, but I didn't show it. And it'll only be easier from this point on. I'll keep succeeding, have some fun, and before I know it, I'll be raining fiery death upon these idiots.

Life is great!
