

The Huntress

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“This never gets more pleasant,” the tawny skinned woman sighed, leaning back from her knees to rest on her heels. She rubbed at her forehead with the sleeve of her tunic, wiping away sweat and tucking the most offensive strands of hair under her wide brimmed pointed hat. In front of her, lying between two hollowed out half logs, was the bloated and decomposing corpse of a man, more mushroom and moss than flesh. The witch leaned back over the body, having taken her breath of air not muddled with decay, and continued to harvest the mushrooms with a carving knife to toss into a wicker basket at her side.

“Excuse me?” A small melodic voice from a source unseen startled her.

She whipped her head at the offender with a steel tongue ready to strike, surprised to see a petite and pale blonde girl wrapped in a white cloak with a spear taller than her strapped to her back. The girl couldn’t have been more than a year or two into adulthood, a fact that softened the witch before she hurled reckless hexes. “It’s rude to sneak up on people outside their homes.”

The girl shrugged her arms under the cloak that was notably muddied at the bottom from the damp forest trail. “I need to talk to you.”

“You should introduce yourself before demanding answers to questions I’m not even aware of,” The witch stood, brushing off the knees of her leathers.

“I am the Hunter-...ress”

“The Hunter-ress?” The Witch mocked, cocking her hip.

“The Huntress,” she said with confidence.

“There you go. Come inside Huntress, we’ll talk there,” the witch waved the hand with the knife towards her cottage just out of sight down the trail.

“No. We can talk here,” the Huntress narrowed her eyes, her tone tensing.

“No?” She scoffed.

“I’ll ask, you’ll answer,” the girl took a swaggering step forward, as if to intimidate the witch with height when she was a head shorter, “Dragon hearts, what do they do?”

“...What?”

“Dragon- Hearts- What do they do?” The Huntress took another step closer, the bulge of a gripped hilt clear under the cloak.

“They’re given as offerings to the Light Council,” the witch droned, quickly tiring of the interaction.

“Don’t think I’m oblivious to your heresy, Witch. What do they do when ingested?” The click of a sword unseating from its scabbard whispered from under her cloak, a clear threat to the woman armed only with a carving knife.

“....Who do you think you ar-”

“Answer the question,” she snapped.

“If inquisitors run out from behind any of these trees, I’ll gut you before I go down,” It was the Witch’s turn to lift her blade and threaten the girl back. “.... They grant you the power of their blood, to have what you most desire for yourself.”

“Like what?” She took another step, the cloak dragging along the dirt from being too large.

“Like magic, speed, strength, beauty-” The witch looked over the girl with widening eyes and a quickly growing toothy smile. “You know someone who ate one.”

The blonde girl flinched, her brow tightening and eye twitching.

The witch gasped. “I performed the ingestion ritual for a handsome blonde knight not a month ago- Are you his sister?”

The Huntress froze in place, blood rushing to her cheeks.

“...no. No, it’s far more amusing than that,” the witch fought to suppress a giggle.

“You shut your mouth, Heretic!” The Huntress hissed the words.

“You... are him, aren’t you? What a delightful desire,” she purred.

“I-I didn’t want this!” The huntress stammered. “You need to reverse it!” She finally drew her hidden sword from under her cloak, holding out a plain short sword towards the Witch.

The witch clicked her tongue as she slowly shook her head. “If that’s what you actually wanted to happen, you wouldn’t be a beautiful girl shaking a sword at me.” She stepped up slowly, letting the knife drop from her raised hands. The Huntress grimaced and took a step back, not attacking as the witch slowly pushed her blade to the side with the tip of one finger. The witch only smiled, gently cupping the trembling cheek of the girl that now had tears at the corners of her panicked eyes. “Was it hard? I’m sure it was a frightening journey.”

“I- I didn’t-”

“I know, it’s ok. You’re safe here,” the witch took another step forward, bringing the shorter girl into a hug.

The sword dropped from the Huntress' softening grasp, her eyes wide and confused. "I wanted to be strong," she whispered after a long moment of silence.

"You are strong," the witch replied softly, moving to gently stroke the long blonde hair that flowed like silk.

"I- I- I-"

Her voice dropped to a laced whisper. "You're allowed to not hate it."

The blonde girl stuttered, sniffed, trembled her chin, and began to cry into the neck of the woman holding her.