

Hunter's Heart

BY CHRISTINE POPE

ILLUSTRATION: PAMELA JAWORSKA

The queen is angry.

This is not an uncommon occurrence. She is an expert at finding fault—the roast joint is cold, her bed linens not aired properly, the hem of her new gown uneven.

But all these are trifles, and I know at once that whatever has raised her ire this time, it is not a trifle. Her magnificent bosom heaves beneath its covering of embroidered gold bullion, and the faintest of lines appears in the perfection of the ivory skin between her arched brows. The line is gone so quickly it is possible I imagined it, but the queen herself briefly raises a finger to the betraying flesh, as if to reassure herself by touching the skin there that she left no permanent mark.

“Huntsman,” she says, and I bow my head.

We are alone in her sitting room, a bower with walls of rose-tinted marble and numerous softly upholstered divans and chairs, all in flattering shades of blush and pink and coral. She stands, and I kneel before her. The chamber might as well be bare of all furnishings save the mirror framed in intricately wrought brass on the wall directly behind her.

“The princess, I have learned, is a traitor.”

At this I raise my head, shock making me forget decorum. The queen’s dark eyes flash at me, and I immediately direct my gaze toward the rose-worked needlepoint rug beneath my knees.

“A traitor,” she repeats. “I will not belabor how shocking this is to me—I, who have looked on her as my own flesh and blood.”

Knowing that the queen desires no com-

ment from me, I remain silent. She must have her stage, even if I am the sole member of her audience.

A pause, and then I feel her hand on my shoulder. The faintest scent of roses emanates from those long, elegant fingers as they alight there, delicate as butterflies, before she lifts her hand once more.

“I would not have a public trial. The people, misguided as they might be, love her, and I wish to avoid scandal.”

Still I wait in silence, although my heart begins to pound in long, sounding strokes, as if it has divined some truth my mind has yet to grasp.

The queen places her hand beneath my chin and lifts my head. At any other time her touch would have wakened hopes I dared not acknowledge, but now as I meet her gaze I sense only a chill, as if those dark eyes were not windows to a soul, but only gaping holes hinting at the utter emptiness within.

“You are brave, my hunter.” Now her voice is a purr, warm and inviting as a soft bed at the end of a long day. “Brave, and loyal, and true. Can I trust you to do as I ask?”

“Anything, my queen,” I manage. How can I protest, when my acquiescence may coax her to remain touching me even a few seconds longer?

But she removes her hand from my chin and smiles, as if she knows she need do nothing else to earn my blind obedience.

“You will take the princess,” she says, and now her voice is hard, cold and brilliant as the

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mirror hanging on the wall behind her. “Take her into the forest, far from prying eyes. Once you are there, take the fine dagger you carry at your belt and cut her heart from her breast.”

I cannot say why this pronouncement surprises me. Its root has been there for some time now, increasing with every compliment paid the princess, every admiring gaze sent in her direction. Jealousy, the dark vine growing at the heart of the kingdom.

My voice comes in a harsh whisper. “And then, my queen?”

“Bring the heart to me.” She turns to an elegant little gilt-topped table and retrieves a box of carved ebony, black as the princess’s hair. “Place the heart in this box, and bring it to me as proof of your loyalty.”

I say, “It will be done, my queen.” For what else can I do? If the price of jealousy is death, then the cost of disloyalty is more than I wish to pay.

She presses the box into my hands. “Rise, noble hunter. See that the deed is done before the day is out.”

The dismissal is obvious. I wrap my cold fingers around the box and rise to my feet. A bow feels foolish and superfluous after agreeing to such a request, but I make my obeisance, as I know she expects it. Then, with the sharp edges of the box still biting into my chilled flesh, I leave the room.

She is not known for her patience, no, not this queen. I dare not tarry, as I know she is all too likely to find another to carry out her dark errand if I am slow to follow her instructions.

It is a bright day, warm with the promise of coming summer. The little princess walks in the garden, the sunlight finding flickers of copper in her long black hair. She raises her face to me and smiles; I have been in the household all her life.

She has no reason to fear me.

“Come, princess,” I say. “There is something in the forest I would like you to see.”

“Have you made a great discovery?” she asks, a teasing lilt in her voice. Her eyes are bluer than the forget-me-nots in the garden border, bluer than the sky.

“A very great discovery,” I reply, forcing a smile.

We go on foot. The great forests come almost to the castle walls, and for the first mile or so the way is well-trodden, used often by the members of the royal household when they want to play at rusticating. But the path then grows more narrow, the trees crowding on every side, jealous of man’s encroachment. It is here that I hunt the deer and the boar for the queen’s table. Would that my intended prey had their fleetness of foot.

“Is it very much farther?” the princess asks. She is too sweet-tempered for complaint, but even so I hear the edge of weariness in her voice.

“Not much farther,” I tell her. I find I cannot look at her directly.

We come then to a clearing, a hidden place of green grass within the crowding fir and pine. With a happy sigh, the princess sinks down onto a fallen log.

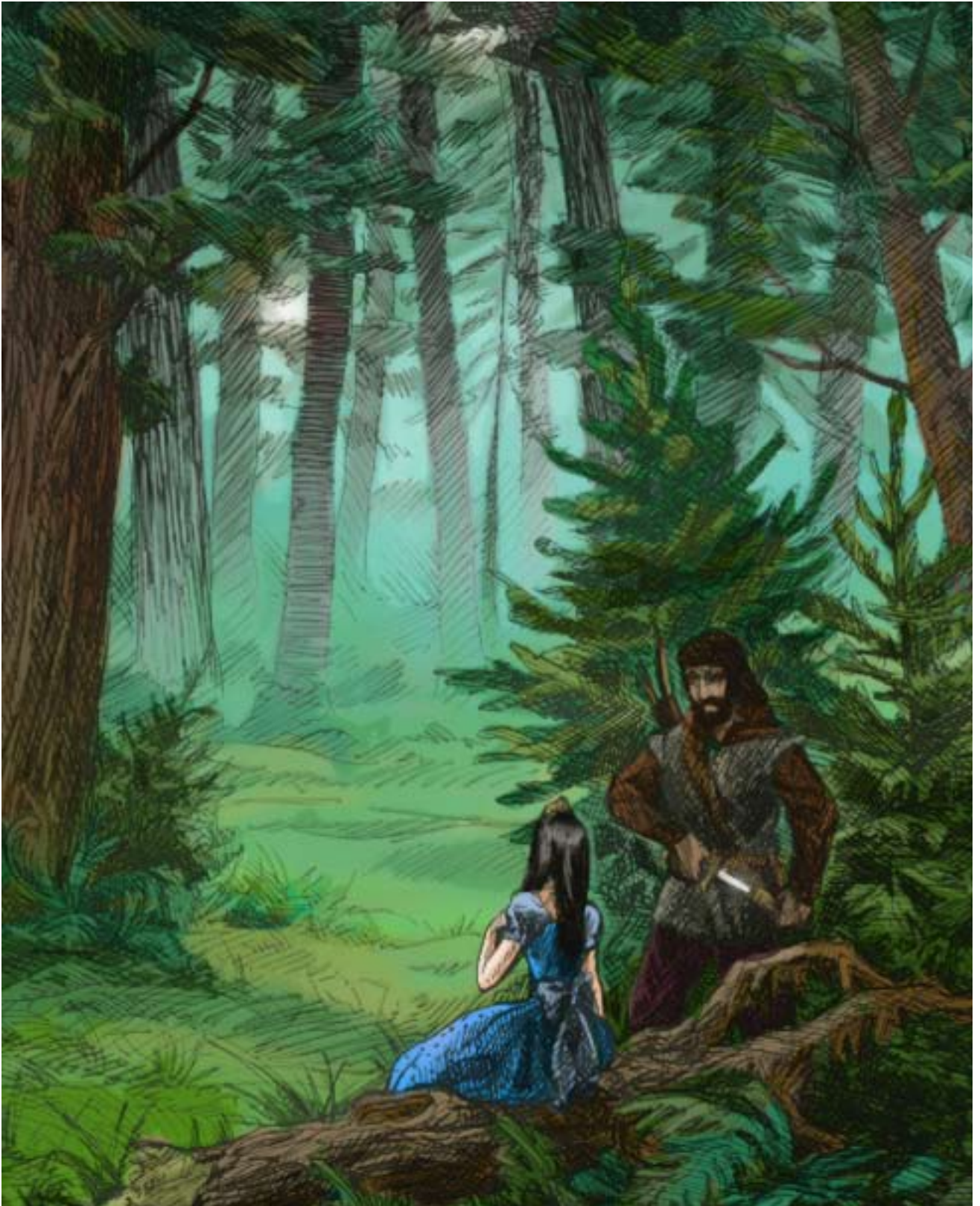
“I can see why no one else has made this discovery,” she says, and wriggles her feet within their tiny slippers. “For I doubt anyone else but a huntsman would come this far into the forest.”

I do not bother with a reply. Now that we are here, I know I must harden my heart for the task ahead. Best to make it quick.

The knife is very bright as I draw it from its sheath. I had not thought so much sunlight could penetrate the forest canopy, but the steel sparkles under its rays, brilliant as the diamonds in the queen’s crown.

At first the princess does not understand. Her smile grows uncertain as I approach, but

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it is only as I raise the knife for the killing blow that realization enters those sky-colored eyes.

She lets out a cry and falls to my knees. "You cannot!"

"I must," I say. I look everywhere but at the tear-stained perfection of her face. "It is the will of the queen."

"Why?" she sobs. "What have I done?"

Nothing, I want to say. Nothing but grow more beautiful with every passing day, until you are the brilliant sun eclipsing her waning moon.

I know I cannot make her understand the weariness of encroaching years, the slow tide of resentment toward those younger, stronger, more vigorous.

More beautiful.

I say instead, "It will only hurt for a moment." And I raise the knife.

Only to find some invisible force staying my hand. I stand there, blade glittering in the sun, as the princess weeps at my feet. How long, I do not know, but after a time, my arm, strong as it is, begins to waver. At last I lower the knife.

She does not move. Her hair is a curtain of black silk, obscuring her features.

Again she asks, "Why?"

I have no answer. I could tell her that there is little enough beauty in the world, and I find I have no desire to take her from it. Or I could say that the queen is wrong, and evil, and in conscience I cannot do as she bids any longer.

But I say neither of these things. For a moment I reflect on what my punishment might be should the queen learn of my treachery. Then the princess lifts her head and stares at me, and in the wondering innocence of her face I see something of why I let her live. One death cannot halt the slow, steady flow of time. The queen might wish to stop it, or at least try to pretend that she is forever changeless, but I know better.

"Run into the forest, little princess," I say.

"There is no life for you in the palace now. God grant you grace that you might find a better one somewhere else in the world."

She rises to her feet. I see an almost queenly grace in her movements as she takes my free hand in both of hers and says, "Thank you."

And then she is off, skirts gathered in her hands as she disappears down one of the paths that lead into the clearing. Her gown is a wisp of fallen sky between the darker green of the forest. The trees shelter her fleeing form. She is gone, lost to me forever.

On my way back to the palace, I bring down a young buck and carefully remove the heart from his breast. It pains me to leave his carcass on the forest floor, but I know the queen must never suspect my treachery. The heart fits very well within the box she has given me.

It is my secret, my quiet rebellion. And if I should die because of my duplicity, so be it. The princess lives, and within her, some part of me lives on as well.

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