

# Huntress

A TALE FROM CARROCK

**D**IDO RUSHED UP THE HALL, long skirts flowing behind her, face flushed and red hair bouncing with her rapid stride. Another flight of stairs, one more corner. Hurry, hurry! She tripped on the wide steps, but expertly caught her balance.

“Damn dress,” she mumbled, gathering up the heavy golden brocade so she could run more easily. She made it to the top of the stairs and dropped the dress. Two deep breaths and then she turned the corner. The family was already waiting.

“Dido!” Lady Tabea’s lips curved down in disapproval at the young woman’s tousled crimson locks. She reached out and righted the silver circlet on the girl’s brow, shook her head at the flushed face, the heaving breast.

“Take a moment to compose yourself,” the lady ordered. She herself was the picture of perfection, long, graying gold-brown hair caught up in a complex bun, her diamond-set circlet in just the right position on her brow, pearl-and-diamond earrings catching the light as she shook her head. Her right hand grasped the edge of her midnight-blue dress, embroidered with real gold and silver threads. She turned and stepped next to her husband, resplendent in the white uniform of the Lord of Carrock.

“You were late again,” Asha whispered as Dido took her place next to Kyle.

“Shut up,” she snapped at the other girl. The young man glanced at his fiancée, brow just slightly annoyed.

“Stop it, Asha,” he ordered. His sister stuck her tongue out – very unladylike, but typical of her. She straightened her green dress, cut just like Dido’s and held her arm out to her cousin Jeb, who had offered to escort her that afternoon.

The lord nodded to the marshal, who in turn waved at a servant. Melodious thunder of a horn and the curtains raised to let in the light and allow the royal family to step out onto the balcony to watch the arrival of the ambassador from Geshur.

Dido bit her lip as she glimpsed the woods beyond the walls of the castle of Carrock.

“Homesick?” Kyle asked through his official smile. She gave no answer, only bowed her head slightly for a moment, then raised it again.

The train of the ambassador wound its way up the hill like a gaily colored snake. First came the honor-guard of Carrock, all on horseback, then the cavalry of Geshur, followed by the gilded carriage of the ambassador and two more in silver. Another cavalcade of armed horsemen completed the train. Dido’s brown eyes followed with only marginal interest as the first carriage drew to a halt and disgorged its cargo. She stuck out her lower lip a bit as she noticed the squat man in the turban and flowing, varicolored robes. The lord and lady descended the stairs, followed by their children and escorts. Kyle gently squeezed Dido’s hand and she immediately put on her winning smile, but her eyes stayed cold.

“Welcome to Carrock, Ambassador Kasim,” the lord said with a courtly bow.

“Lord Dylan, an honor it is,” the ambassador replied, pressing both hands together under his chin and bowing lower than his host. “And m’lady.” He bowed to her as well.

“My family,” the lord said, stepping aside.

“Ah yes, young Lord Kyle,” Kasim acknowledged with another deep bow.

“My fiancée, Dido,” Kyle introduced her. She curtsied. The ambassador gave her only a quick smile, just glancing at her fresh, full beauty.

“And young Lady Asha.” The girl was delighted as she curtsied. “You are looking more like your beautiful mother every day.” At that Dido’s smile drooped a little and her eyes became even colder.

“Thank you,” Asha whispered.

“Shall we?” the lord asked, gesturing to the entrance to the great hall beneath the stairs.

“Of course, of course.” The ambassador officiously stepped up next to the tall, gray-haired man, a fat dwarf compared to the ruler these lands. For a moment Dido’s smile became a sneer, but she quickly contained it, flicking a quick glance at Kyle. His smile was still there, but it was perfunctory, his eyes fixed straight ahead at the back of his mother’s head. The lady dropped behind the two men, as Geshurian custom dictated, and followed them into the great hall.

The young people came next, followed by five servants of the ambassador and later by two veiled women and their entourage. Dylan took his seat on the throne at the head of the high table, Kasim to his right and Tabea to his left.

“You must be tired from your journey, lord ambassador,” the lord was saying cordially as Dido was seated across from Kyle, next to Tabea.

“Oh, no, oh, no,” the little man laughed, brushing at his formidable moustache. “I usually sleep when we travel. The Geshurian carriages are built in such a way that they make the ride almost as smooth as a boat trip over a calm lake.” Dido’s eyes flicked towards him disdainfully and then rested on the table cloth. She looked across at Kyle. His smile was still there, just barely and his green eyes had a bored quality to them. She waited long enough until his eyes caught hers.

“How long?” she mouthed. He wove his head back and forth slightly. Too long. She bit her lip again and then winced. She looked at Asha who was sitting next to her, grinning impishly. It was all Dido could do not to reach down and massage her leg. She looked back over at the little man, who was droning on about Geshurian technology. Tabea was still smiling and it still looked somewhat real. The lord looked interested, but there was just a slight tautness to his smile. She looked at Kyle and then abruptly stood up.

“Excuse me,” she announced, turned and walked out, leaving stunned expressions at the table. Only Kasim didn’t notice and continued his monologue. Tabea gave a quick nod to her son, who rose and followed his fiancée out of the great hall.

She ran down the hall, tearing the circlet out of her hair and making the pearl-tipped pins fall out as well. Up one flight of stairs, then to the right.

“Dido!” came a voice from behind her, but she did not slow. She slowed just before the wide, oaken door, shoved it open and careened into her room. The door slammed behind her.

“Aaaaaagh!” she howled, hurling her circlet across the room. She looked around and grabbed up the heavy silver pitcher from her washing stand. It, too, crashed against the wall.

There was a thumping at the door.

“Dido!”

“Go away, Kyle,” she snapped and hurled a cosmetic bottle at the entryway.

“Come on, Dido, what’s wrong?” he called through the heavy wood. “Can’t we talk?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong, Kyle á Carrock!” she screamed. “It’s all this pomp and circumstance. It’s that fat little b----- in the great hall. It’s that stinking sister of yours. It’s your mother’s looks. It’s your whole damn family! You understand?”

On the other side of the door, the young man sucked his breath, a furrow on his brow, eyes clenched shut. His one fist tightened then released. His eyes opened.

“Look, I’m sorry.” He pressed the words out uncertainly.

“Yeah, right, you’re sorry!” the girl on the other side roared. “You drag me up to the castle from my lovely home. You make a lady out of me. You make me attend boring state dinners. Your family disdains me. Well, I tell you what, Kyle á Carrock, I’m leaving. I’m going home.”

“No!” The strangled cry escaped his lips. He could hear a bustling about in the room, then a tearing sound.

“Come on, Dido, just this one more time and then we’ll go out to the woods, like I promised,” he pleaded.

“You said that *last* time and then that jerk of a father has you riding all over your precious lands to make sure that all is in order and I have to cool my heels here in this dank dungeon of a castle with that stinking sister and arrogant mother of yours! Well, not anymore, Kyle á Carrock, not anymore!”

“Dido...”

“Just leave me alone, will you?” It was almost a wail. He grasped the handle and turned it. The door gave easily and he looked into the room. She was standing there in the middle of it in her under-dress, the gold brocade in a crumpled heap beside the bed. Her hair was wild, her makeup smeared. A single tear ran down her cheek, brown eyes angry, broken. Unbidden, the memory rose in his eyes.

“Dido,” he whispered. She sniffled and stumbled two steps forward, a wounded doe, and collapsed into his arms. Her head was on his chest as she sobbed, makeup and tears staining his white uniform. Tears of his own stood out as he stroked the dark red hair, kissed the top of her head, drew in her smell.

“Don’t leave me, Dido,” he whispered. “Don’t leave me.”



“WELL, DIDO MADE QUITE a spectacle this afternoon,” the lord said quietly as he eased himself into his favorite chair in Kyle’s room. The young man just nodded mutely.

“She feels trapped,” Dylan continued after taking a sip from his cup. “It’s not easy for a country girl to come to a city – much less our city with all of its tradition.”

“Dad, she’s not really a country girl.” Kyle’s voice was strained. The older man looked up sharply, green eyes taking on a keen tone.

“Oh?”

His son tightly clasped his hands between his legs.

“I never told you, because she asked me not to.”

“Then don’t,” Dylan said quickly. Kyle looked at him, the anguish bright in his eyes.

“She wants to go back – if only for a little time.”

“Now?” the lord asked.

“Now. And I need to go with her.” He leaned back, gripping the arm rests.

The gray head shook emphatically.

“No, not now. Not until Kasim leaves.”

“That little jerk is going to stay here for another month,” the young man cried. “Dido needs to leave now. I *promised* her, Dad, I *promised*.” He held out both hands, palms up.

“And there are some promises you can’t keep.” He set down his cup and leaned forward. “Kyle, you are the heir of Carrock. You have responsibilities to your land.”

“That never stopped you from seeing Mom!” He leaned back again, glaring.

“That was different,” Dylan returned, stiffening.

“Look, Dad, I’m first and foremost Dido’s fiancée. I need to go with her.”

“No, Kyle.” Now the voice had become firm, commanding. “You are first and foremost my son. You are the heir of Carrock and the Northkin. You will stay until Kasim leaves. No ifs, ands, or buts.” He wagged one finger at his son, eyes serious. The young man glared for a moment, his knuckles white on the arm-rests. Then they relaxed, though the eyes remained distant.

“Very well, Father.”

There was a flicker in the older man’s eyes for a moment and his lips softened at that epithet.

“Good night, Kyle,” he said and left. His son did not answer, only rose and went to his balcony, looking out into the gathering night.

She had tidied up best she could and now sat perched on the edge of her bed, still in her under-dress, red hair tousled, knees drawn up, looking out her open balcony doors. The mountains beckoned her, a majestic, blackish-purple beneath the darkening blue evening sky. Her mouth was open just slightly in a longing pant.

There was a tap at the door. She did not move. Another tap and then the sound of the handle turning.

“Dido?” Lady Tabea inquired, sticking her bejeweled head through the crack. The girl remained still. The woman let herself in and closed the door behind her. She sat down on the edge of the bed, just behind Dido. The girl’s lips pressed together as she heard the rustling dress, felt the weight on the end of the bed.

“It must be so hard for you, dear,” the lady began gently, “missing all of the beauty of the forest.” She sighed. “I know. I sometimes miss my farm, too.

“Still,” she continued after a good silence, “you need to be a bit more courteous to our guests. I know that Kasim is an arrogant little man and I don’t like him, either, but he’s an important guest and we have to be nice to him.” She paused. “You’ll do better next time, I know.” Silence rested on the room. Dido gave no sign whether or not she’d heard. After a moment Tabea reached out and gently brushed the red-brown locks with her fingertips. Immediately the girl jerked her head away, and favored the older woman with a glare. She shuddered at the cold, brown eyes, but remained until Dido looked away again, back towards the dusky mountains.

“Good night,” the lady finally said, rising. She rustled her way to the door, opened it quietly and let the lock click into place behind her.

Now the white moonlight lay over the room, washing the still-motionless Dido in its glare. The mountains were almost invisible. You could just discern them against the slightly lighter blackness of the early summer sky. Then the curtains stirred in the gentle breeze. Dido drew her breath in delight. There it was: the scent of fir, oak, and maple, of rich forest soil.

As suddenly as it came, it was gone, but not so the light in the girl’s eye. She leaped off the bed and shed her under-dress. She grabbed a towel and wiped the last vestiges of make-up from her face before opening her wardrobe. She reached down into the farthest corner of it, feeling around in its dark depths until she found it. She withdrew a light pile of carefully folded clothes and carried it to her bed. First there was the loin-cloth of deer-skin from a fawn. She tied it snugly around her waist. Then she slipped into the supple leather dress that fell just below her knees. The moonlight hid the blemishes, the careful patches and repairs. She took a heavy leather belt and tied it around her waist, raising the dress so it now came to just above her knees, gathered her hair back and tied it with a leather thong. Then she pulled her rough woolen cloak around her shoulders.

She went back to the wardrobe and retrieved a skin bag and a wrapped package of white linen. She laid the package on the bed and untied it, rolling it open. Inside were a staff, a short bow, unstrung, and a quiver

full of arrows. She hesitated then slung the quiver over her shoulder, the bag over the other and grabbed the staff and bow. She rushed to the balcony and perched on the edge of it, reaching out to grab the heavy ivy that grew up the side of the castle, her path to freedom. She hesitated again. One word passed her lips.

“Kyle.” She glanced at the darkened maw that was her room, looked back at the ivy and then turned and hurried back into the bedroom. She rummaged in the desk for a moment, drew out a sheet of paper. She dipped her quill, not bothering to check its sharpness, and hurriedly wrote a few lines. She blew on the paper, folded it up, wrote a name on it and dropped it on unrolled linen on her bed.

She paused to look around, her mouth turning down a bit at the edges, eyes glistening with moisture. She brushed at her cheek.

“Good-bye.” It was a bare whisper. And then she was out the door and down the ivy – to freedom.



LATE MORNING SUNLIGHT FILTERED THROUGH the high windows of the hallway to the women’s wing as Kyle made his way to her chambers. His gait was hurried but measured, as he’d been taught. He paused and knocked at the door.

“Dido?” No answer. He knocked again, this time a bit more insistently. “Dido!?” Still no answer. Hesitantly he tried the handle and drew his breath when he felt the door give. He pushed it open, looking into the large, dim room. Sun would only fall through the west window in the evening, just the way that Dido liked it. He glanced around the empty room and then entered.

“Dido?” he asked again, this time more timidly. He walked to the washing-room door. It was open and there was no one there. He turned around and nearly tripped over something white on the floor between the bed and the open balcony doors. He bent and picked it up. It was her under-dress. He glanced over towards the wardrobe and noticed that the door was wide open.

“Oh!” The sound just barely escaped his lips. With one bound he was in front of it, looking back into the darkest, farthest corner of it.

“Oh no!” he whispered. “No!” This time it was a yell. He turned and stormed out of the room, missing a small, yellowish piece of paper lying against the wall next to the door.

“She’s gone!” he announced, bursting into his father’s office. Dylan looked up from discussing some policy with Kasim.

“Kyle, this can wait,” he said sternly.

“No, it can’t. She’s gone!” He stood there, hands firmly planted on his hips, glaring. The lord turned to the ambassador.

“I’m sorry, lord ambassador,” he began.

“No need, Lord Dylan,” the little man replied, getting up with a simle. “In Geshur family matters always take precedence. Your marshal had kindly offered to show me your arsenal and fire-arms manufacture. I believe that I will take him up on that now.” And with a quick bow to the lord and a glare at the young man he left the room.

“Now that you’ve competently ruined the best discussion that I’ve had with Kasim since his arrival, I want to know *exactly* what it is that brings you barging into my study,” the gray-haired one said icily. The son’s stance did not soften one bit.

“Dido is gone and it’s *your* fault,” he snapped.

“How so?”

“Because your precious Carrock negated the promise I made to her. If you had let me leave as I had asked this wouldn’t have happened.”

“How do you know that she’s not hiding out in the castle somewhere?” his father asked, placing his fingertips together to form a tent. A light of hope dawned in Kyle’s eyes.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No, you hadn’t, had you.” The lord’s green eyes still had a piercing cast to them. “Next time think before you go running into a high office that is in the middle of delicate negotiations.” He waved his right hand. “Now go and search the castle. And,” he added in a gentler tone, “let me know what you find.”

Kyle nodded once and left the office to call out a few of his servants to aid him in the search.

She awoke when the sun was already high overhead, and rolled over, blinking at the blue sky that peeked through the leafy canopy of the light wood. At first she stretched luxuriantly and reached out to grasp the covers and pull them up to her chin, but all her searching fingers found was the rough, red wool cloak that she’d covered herself with the night before.

“Wha...?” The words escaped her and then suddenly a blissful smile spread across her face as she stretched again, looking around at the small dell where she’d decided to bed down in the wee hours of the night. Her eyes widened as she sat up and looked around again.

“Oh!” she gasped. “I’m free!” She laughed loud and leaped up, twirling around.

“I’m free!”

“Sir?” Kyle turned his head from where he was leaning on the balcony railing of Dido’s room. Benedic was plucking his elbow, swarthy features serious.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I found this.” The servant held out a small yellowish note, with Kyle’s name sloppily written on it. The young man’s mouth drew back into something between a grimace and a smile.

“Thank you, Benedic,” he said, nodding. The servant gave a slight bow and floated back into the room gracefully. Kyle paused for a moment and shook his head.

“She’s still not sharpening her quill,” he muttered to himself and opened the note. And as he read it, he paled.

*I want to be a Huntress again.  
I want to be alone in my forest again.  
I want to feel freedom again.  
So let me go!<sup>1</sup>*

He read it again, unbelieving. Then he staggered back and sat down hard on the marble floor of the balcony.

“She’s really gone!” And he buried his head in his arms for a long time.



**I**T WAS JUST AS SHE had left it: the tumble-down awning of birch branches and vines over the opening to the cave. Sunlight lazily drifted through the leafy canopy of the old oak on which her father had built the platform where she slept during the fair days. Over there was the small waterfall that provided freshwater, a small arm diverted from the larger stream that splashed merrily away back in a small, private clearing that served as her bathing place. The trees and bushes formed a living palisade around her summer home.

Dido gave a little cry of delight as she stepped from the trees and twirled around in the soft afternoon light. She was home again. She dropped her staff, cloak, bow and quiver next to the ring of stones, not noticing the single large paw-print in the center of the ashes. She took a quick sip from her waterfall before walking over to the cave. The heavy bearskin covering was still there, too, just as she’d left it when Kyle had taken her away to the castle. She reached out and gently touched it, before pulling it aside and looking into the cave that served as her storage place and bedroom on rainy nights. She glanced around, surprised at the disarray. The carefully arranged wicker baskets were overturned and two of her prize clay jars were shattered, two spots marking where they had shed their precious contents. The blankets in the corner that marked her pallet were all pressed down and an unpleasant smell of wild beast wafted towards her. The shock in her face slowly hardened, her lovely mouth turning down at its corners, lines appearing between her eyebrows.

A growling behind her made her turn suddenly. It would have been better if she hadn’t because it was that sudden movement that caused it to see her. The bear bounded forward across the clearing. Dido yelped and tried to rush past the arbor and over to the oak tree. The bear was now almost upon her, gave out another roar and lifted its paw to strike.

“Ursus!” came a rich, clear voice from behind the beast. Its claws stopped in their downward stroke, sparing Dido for the moment. It turned to see who had called it, noting the tall woman who now stood just yards behind it in the clearing. She was only armed with a spear, dressed in rough home-spun tunic and trousers, her raven hair tied back, a leather thong with a curious amber stone in it around her forehead. The pause was only momentary as the brute bounded towards her, snarling, lashed out with its deadly paw. She threw up her cloak to catch the heavy blow. It thrust the thick cloth aside but contacted only air. The roar subsided to a bewildered growl as the big head turned from side to side to see where its quarry had gone.

Now behind it came the howl of a wolf and it spun around again. The woman was now standing between it and the frightened girl who hadn’t been able to move since the bear had nearly caught her. It let out a roar, angered.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by “Hunter” by Dido as recorded on *No Angel*.

“That’s enough, Ursus!” the woman commanded. The big brute shook its head and began to advance more cautiously now. It froze as it heard rustling behind it, the smell of wolf suddenly heavy in the air. It looked back to see seven huge wolves break from the forest, gray, watchful shadows. There was a rumble from deep within its throat and it made to turn away and lumber off. Then, quick as a wink it reared and tried to strike for the woman again, but she was faster, swinging her spear down heavily on its snout. The bear staggered back, looked at her stupidly and then collapsed. She turned toward Dido and held out a hand, a warm smile on her face.

“He shouldn’t be bothering you any more, child.” The voice was maternal and the swarthy features warm with affection.

“Is it – is it dead?” Dido asked as her breath came back.

The woman sighed.

“Unfortunately yes.” She looked at it with sorrow in her hazel eyes. “You see, he went rogue and not even I can reverse that.” She looked back at Dido. “He won’t hurt you any more, child.”

“Don’t call me that,” Dido muttered, pushing herself away from the rocky face of the hill and standing up straight. “And who are you?”

“My name is Lora,” the woman said kindly and then uttered a series of yips and barks. All wolves but one turned and silently disappeared back into the underbrush. This one came over to Lora, sat down on its haunches in front of her and blinked at Dido curiously, tongue lolling out.

“And this is Swift.” The younger woman remained tense, warily eyeing the beast. Lora laughed.

“Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you. She wouldn’t hurt any human if she could help it.” Here she became thoughtful. “It’s said that there is even human blood in her ancestry.”

“She’s a wolf,” Dido said matter-of-factly. “You have saved my life, Lora, and I thank you for that. I’d offer you something to eat, but that bear has eaten all of it.”

“Well, let’s take some of it back then,” Lora replied, loosening a large flint knife from her belt that Dido had missed seeing before.

“But didn’t you say...?” she sputtered. The other woman shrugged.

“It’s not much use to let the carcass lay around and just because I speak to animals doesn’t mean that I don’t eat them every once in a while. After all, we each need to do our part in keeping things going in an orderly fashion.” And with that she turned and busied herself with skinning the bear. After a few minutes’ hesitation, Dido slipped into her cave, retrieved her two knives from the niche above the doorway and went to help her.

“Son?” The gentle question made Kyle look up. His mother was crouched next to him, a look of concern on her face. Wordlessly he held out the slip of paper. Tabea took it and let her eyes glide swiftly across the paper.

“So she’s gone,” she sighed softly, eyes becoming moist.

“Damn Dad!” Kyle muttered, then looked at his mother darkly. “She said it was *your* fault, too.”

Tabea sighed heavily.

“And after all I did to try to make her feel welcome.” She shook her head. “She really must have missed her forest – far more than I ever missed the farm.” Her son glanced at her, surprised. “Oh, yes, she told me about where she came from – at least before she became so fearful of everything that went on here at the castle.” She breathed out heavily again. “She’s a woodland creature, Kyle, not suited for this ordered life. She needs the fresh air and the green of the forest. It might have been a mistake for me to be so insistent that she become a real lady.”

“She already *was* a lady,” Kyle shot back. “That’s why I fell in love with her.” He looked out towards the mountains. “Ever since I’ve been a little boy I’ve had this image of the perfect woman in my head. She was a wild girl, someone from the forests who could talk with animals and live off the land – a lady who ruled over the animals as we rule over people. She was dark, with black hair and brown eyes.” He sighed. “And while she lived away from civilization I always imagined that she could adapt to living in the city.” He looked over at his mother now. “It’s a bit like what they tell about Dad’s once being a wolf. He still has that wildness, you know.”

“And Dido was that woman?” She now sat down next to him, drawing her knees up under her simple dress. Kyle shrugged and gazed back at the darkening sky.

“Sort of. When I first saw her I thought, ‘There’s my perfect woman.’ But then I realized that she was different from what I had imagined. Not worse or better, just different.”

“Were you disappointed?”

“Somewhat. Then yesterday I finally realized that it was tougher for her to adapt than I thought.”

“She’s young.” He looked over at his mother.

“Only three years younger than me.”

“That can be enough to make a big difference – as you see with you two.” Tabea nodded, then fixed him with a thoughtful gaze. “Do you love her?”

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “You know that I want to marry her.”

“What are you going to do?” The look in her blue eyes made him suddenly blush.

“I’m going to go after her. I think I know where to find her.”

“And then?”

“And then I’ll ask if she’ll come back with me. We’ll work this out and maybe she can spend some time in the forest...”

“And if she doesn’t?” Tabea asked gently.

He paused suddenly, looked away and didn’t say anything for a long time.

“If she doesn’t,” he finally answered haltingly, “I’ll let her go. She needs to be free.”



THE FIRE CRACKLED MERRILY IN the small ring of stones. Dido sat, knees drawn up, watching the bear meat packed with fragrant herbs and berries sizzle on long spits of fresh birch. Across from her Lora was cleaning her flint knife gently, Swift sprawled beside her, head on her paws, eyes shut, but ears lightly moving back and forth.

“You made good work of that bear,” the older woman said.

“The meat will last me a while once I smoke it,” Dido replied matter-of-factly, gazing back into the fire thoughtfully.

“You’re going to stay here even after he took over your cave?” Lora was genuinely surprised.

“It’s my home. I just haven’t lived here over winter and spring and so it thought it could move in.” She continued gazing into the fire.

“Lora?”

“Yes?” The dark-haired woman put away her knife as she answered.

“How did you do that with the bear?” The brown eyes now flicked up at the other woman and the girl’s lower lip protruded slightly.

“What?”

“You just hit it with your spear! You didn’t even draw blood.”

“Oh!” Lora drew out the sound as she smiled thoughtfully. “Let’s just say that my office gives me special gifts. I use them to protect those who need protection.” Here she chuckled. “Though usually I have to protect animals from humans, not the other way around.” She looked piercingly at the girl. “But I think I remember you. Your name is Dido and your foster father was Neb the Wood Hermit. He found you as an orphan and raised you. I remember when you were nine years old, he came down with a strong fever. You tried to help him and then you caught it, too. If your dog Thurga hadn’t come and gotten me, you both would have died.” This whole time Dido shifted uncomfortably, but then suddenly her mouth dropped open as her eyes brightened.

“Wait a minute, *you’re* the one – the Watchcarer, the one Pa always told me about. I thought you were a dream!”

“I can seem that way if I choose,” Lora admitted. “But I hardly am a dream. I’m glad to see you’re well. I’m also glad that I found Ursus when I did. Neb would never have forgiven me if I’d let a rogue bear kill his daughter.”

“He couldn’t say anything if it did,” she replied, just a bit sullenly. “He’s dead you know.”

“Yes, two summers ago. And last fall you went away with a young man – a noble I think.” Lora studied Dido carefully as she spoke.

“Kyle.” It just popped out, before she could stifle it.

“Kyle à Carrock.” The Watchcarer’s gaze suddenly had turned inward. “I remember him quite well. A bright little guy.” She smiled. “He wanted to marry me.” Dido’s mouth dropped open.

“What?”

Lora laughed brightly.

“Oh, he was only eight. He doesn’t remember me clearly any more. I won’t let him.” She looked closely at Dido. “You care about him, don’t you?”

“What is that to you?” the girl snapped back, frowning.

“Well, if he came and took you to his castle, there must have been *something* there.” Dido bit her lip, and for the first time a bit of moisture played around her eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Her voice was choked

“All right.” Lora pulled one of the spits from the fire and poked at the meat. “That bear will certainly last you a few months.”

“If I don’t have any unexpected guests.” The girl’s voice now became clear again and a slight smile played at the corners of her lips. “Otherwise I’ll just find something else to eat – I’m a huntress, you know.”

“Hm.” Lora smiled, replacing the spit. “I wonder what old Neb would say to that.”

“Pa was the only other person who cared about animals as much as you.” She laughed lightly at the memory and picked up her own spit to test it.

“Dido.” She looked up at the other woman. The Watchcarer’s eyes suddenly had taken on a piercing quality, the firelight now flickering in their midst. Dido shivered and her Adam’s apple moved slightly.

“If you’re such a great huntress, you should know when a quarry is worth pursuing.” The girl nodded, almost involuntarily.

“Then let me tell you,” Lora said quietly, “he is the best quarry you’ve ever pursued. Don’t let him get away.”



THE SUN HAD BARELY PEEKED above the horizon, and the castle courtyard was still in deep shadow as Kyle put one foot into the stirrup, grabbed the saddle horn, and pulled himself up on Hogart’s back. He straightened himself and drew a deep breath before clicking his tongue. The horse shook its head and started to clop-clop towards the gate.

A shadow detached itself from the wall and reached up to grasp the Hogart’s bridle.

“And where are you off to so early?” Dylan asked benignly.

“As if you’d have to ask,” the young man snapped back, glaring down at his father.

“To find your runaway girl.” The gray head shook back and forth once. “I need you here, son. Benedic can find her.”

“No, *Father*, she needs me *there*.” He made an abrupt gesture towards the mountains. Something in the green eyes of the older man flashed brightly, before they narrowed. Kyle blew out his breath again.

“Look, you let me go and find her and when I come back you’ll have your precious heir to Carrock, whether or not he has a bride at this point. Deal?” Dylan slowly let go of the bridle.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“No. I want Dido to be my wife whether or not I have to be the lord of this land. But I may not get that.” He looked back at the mountains and his voice cracked. “I at least have to try...” The gray head nodded once.

“I understand. Go, son. Go and find your woman.” The young man looked down at his father, brows rising and mouth dropping open just a bit. He blinked, then slowly began to smile. He let out a quick, “Ha!” and dug his heels into the horse’s flanks. Hogart reared with a bright whinny before pounding off through the gate to where *she* lived.

The light gently laid itself over her, outlining every facet of her face and body. She lay on her side, head pillowed on her arm. The stained skin dress had slid a ways up her legs as she breathed evenly. After a few moments she drew a deep breath and blinked, then closed her eyes again. She drew a breath and then sneezed, now finally coming awake. She sat up and stretched, looking around, a slightly puzzled look on her face, before running her hands through her long, loose hair. She let out a long yawn and glanced towards the fire pit. There were only a few embers left, barely glowing in the bright morning sun. Spits of birch in the ashes but there was no one else there. Dido blinked again, brow furrowing slightly, as if she were trying to remember something, but then shrugged and got up. She looked around and barely registered the slight mound where she and Lora had buried the remains of the bear that they weren’t going to eat or use. Then she turned and shuffled towards the leafy barrier to her private stream for a bath.

By late morning her head was a little clearer and she’d gotten through tidying up the cave and now was looking up at her tree, when she heard the stealthy approach. It was only a little sound, but she reacted instantly. She reached up to where she kept her weapons in the arbor, strung the bow and knocked an arrow, taking careful aim towards the woods where she’d head the sound. She drew the bow, the feathers now just touching her ear. Her eyes had taken on a steely cast. And then she saw him as he stepped from the trees into the sun.

“Kyle!” she whispered, dropped the bow and arrow and rushed towards him. He just saw her before she had her arms around his neck and her lips on his chin. He wrapped his own arms around her and gently kissed her mouth. Their greeting was wordless as they collapsed on the soft sod, kissing and caressing furiously.

After a few moments the passion had subsided.

“You came after me,” she whispered.

"I couldn't help it, Huntress," he replied happily. "I love you."

"Then stay here with me." She snuggled up next to him, one arm across his chest the other around his shoulder and neck, head resting on his shoulder.

"You know I can't do that." She looked up to find a softness in his green eyes. She squeezed him tightly before releasing him and straightening up.

"So you'll go back to that prison."

He nodded sadly

"Why?" Her lips curved down in a pout.

"Because that's where I belong, Dido. That's where I must be." He gently took one of her hands and she let him have it. "We Northkin were given a mandate to rule the lands justly. If the line were ever broken Carrock would lose its blessing and fall into disarray, as when my father was young. You know he was in exile..." He looked squarely into her eyes, brow furrowed, mouth firmly set. "I can't let that happen again. The people need more peace than the few years we've had since the Hun-Halk were finally driven off. Father's getting old..."

"He's only in his fifties," she interjected.

"Still, he needs me to be here for him and the family, and the land. Do you understand that." Impulsively she took his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"If you stay now you could have anything you choose," she whispered. He sighed and withdrew his hand.

"No, even if I did stay, I couldn't do that." Once more his countenance became serious. "Dido, as the heir to the throne I can only have one mate at a time. If I – if we were together now I could never take another woman while you are alive. We'd have to marry – and some day I'd need an heir, just like my father now has an heir. I don't think you could handle my being there and your being here."

"Who says I couldn't?" There was now a slight edge to her voice.

"All right, maybe you could, but *I* couldn't and neither could the people." He shook his head. "I wish I could make you understand." His hands opened and closed helplessly. "As the son of the lord of Carrock I have to be a good example to the people."

"That's just your father speaking." He winced at the scorn.

"No, I've been thinking about that. *I* believe it, I really do." He now looked her straight in the eyes. "If the leader is good he will have a strong influence on his people for good. If he is evil, his people will suffer and become corrupt. I can't let that happen. I'm not my own – not like you are your own."

"So what do you want?" Her voice was flat, unemotional, beautiful face now devoid of any emotion.

"I want you to come back with me," he said in a near whisper

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll go home and you can stay here in your forest." His voice cracked as he said it. "Stay here to be a huntress."

"So you'll just let me go, like that?" she asked bitterly, her eyes now glinting dangerously.

"No, Dido, I wouldn't. That's why I'm here. Now." A soft smile crossed his features. "Oh, Dido, I love your wildness so much! If only we could find a way..." He reached out and touched her cheek. She grasped his hand and kissed his palm, before leaning forward and giving him another kiss.

It was late afternoon as she walked him to the edge of the forest where he'd left Hogart to contentedly crop the fresh grass of a small meadow next to the road.

"So this is good-bye," she said sadly, her back to the woods she loved, her face to the man she loved.

"It doesn't have to be," he replied softly. He looked back towards the east where the castle lay, then back at Dido. "Come with me, dearest. We can work something out." He held out his right hand.

Dido looked at him and bit her lip, then she looked back at the woods. And the soft summer breeze leapt joyfully down from the tree-tops and embraced them both.

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