

THE HUNTER

OLD STORY, NEW P.O.V.

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Tin Box
— PRESS —

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“Have you some to share?”

The man came out of the woods that morning as I hung thin slices of venison to dry over the fire, and he stood, barefoot, in the small clearing in front of my hut. He was a stranger—a rare thing in this area—and his every aspect spoke of hunger: sunken cheeks, tawny eyes sunk deep in their sockets, a too-lean body under a filthy shirt and threadbare leggings.

My fauchard was propped close-by, its blade reflecting the flames. I always keep it near at hand, so that even when I'm fast asleep, I know where to reach for it. But I left it resting against a large stone as I stared at him. He stared back, not repeating his question, his jaw clamped tight. As far as I could tell, he carried no weapons, although he could have had a knife hidden somewhere. A person would be foolish indeed to venture into the forest unarmed.

In truth, I had little food to spare. Hunting had been lean that autumn, and the local lord had taken most of my kill in payment for permission to use these lands. The ravens and my bones told me a hard winter was coming; I'd need everything I had to see me through until spring.

But this man was hungry, and if he ventured into town, he'd be run out as a vagrant—or worse. If the lord was in a heavy-handed mood, this man would be lashed bloody. In his weakened state, it might kill him.

“Come join me,” I said.

His shoulders relaxed and he smiled, his teeth a contrast to his dirt-streaked skin. Despite his poor condition he was handsome, which caused me some distress. Had he been clean and well-fed, I couldn't have borne the sight of him.

“If you fetch a sharp stick, I'll cook some of this for you,” I added.

“I'll eat it raw.”

“Your belly's that empty?”

He shrugged. “I don't mind.”

With lithe movements, he sat on the ground near me and crossed his long legs, then watched me intently.

With a degree of fascination, I handed him several slices of the

exceedingly lean meat. Most of the fatty parts had been payment to the lord's men. I'd already eaten the small succulent pieces I'd saved for myself, and I'd also set aside some of the fat. Once the meat was dried, I would grind some of it and then add fat and dried berries, including currants. The resulting small cakes were my primary source of nutrition through the cold months, although I occasionally bought a loaf of bread from one of the bakers in town. I'd made some sausage as well and had stored a few pots of jam for when I craved some variety.

The man took the meat and immediately began to eat, barely chewing before swallowing. I was afraid he might choke. When it was gone, he licked his fingers. "Thank you."

"I've a well in back if you want to drink or wash up. If you wait until I finish this task, I'll make us some tea. I might have a few eggs left too."

He gave me a wide smile and gracefully stood. I didn't watch him lope around the corner of my hut, but I heard his soft footfalls.

It didn't take much longer to finish racking the meat, by which point my skin was filthy, streaked with blood and soot. Some in the village call me a wild man, but that's not true. I keep the interior of my hut as neat and civilized as I can manage. I know that after I die, the forest will reclaim it, and I don't mind that. But as long as I still live, my modest home is mine.

Instead of entering right away, I walked around to the back to wash up. There I found my guest, naked, droplets on his hair and skin glistening like jewels. He was far too thin, but traces of strength remained on his long limbs and broad shoulders. He grinned and shook his head, creating a rainbow as the light hit the spray.

"I haven't had the chance to be clean in a long time," he said.

I nodded my understanding and strode closer. Sometimes my hunts took me far from home and I spent days deep in the trees, sleeping on the ground and sweating into the same filthy clothes. Washing up at my well when I got home always felt like the purest of luxuries.

Without bothering to dress, perhaps because his ragged clothing

was soaking wet from an attempt at laundering, he watched as I cleaned my face and arms and hands. I removed my shirt and gave it a quick rinse as well, thinking that I might do a proper laundry the next day if the weather remained warm. Although I tried to ignore his somewhat predatory gaze, I couldn't help wondering what he thought of me. Tall, broad, and well-muscled, I wear my dark hair in a thick braid, and my beard reaches nearly to midchest. I'd seen my reflection in panes of glass in the village, and I don't consider myself fine-looking, but I'm not ugly either. At least I don't think I am.

"Come inside," I said gruffly.

The hut is constructed of logs I hewed myself and topped by a thickly thatched roof. I've given myself the luxury of a slate floor instead of bare earth; the three unglazed windows have heavy shutters; and I built a stone hearth and chimney for heat and cooking, a rough table with two stools, a cot with a straw-tick mattress, a large cupboard to store my weapons and tools, and a few shelves for everything else. At night, light comes from candles and the fire, and I have furs for warmth when the north winds blow. It is a humble home, even by the standards of my poor little town, but it's mine.

While I heated a pot of water, my guest prowled about as if he'd never been indoors before. Sometimes he picked up a small item—a clay bowl or a jar of salt—and sniffed at it before setting it down.

"You live here alone?" he asked at last.

I grunted an acknowledgment.

"Where is your family?"

"Dead."

There had been a plague when I was half grown. It took my parents and siblings, my aunts and uncles and cousins, and a good deal of the rest of the town. It didn't take me, however, and I'd persuaded the lord's huntsman—who'd lost his son to the illness—to teach me his trade. The decision to live by myself in the forest was my own, and the location suits me. I wasn't the only one to choose relative solitude. There is also a hermit who lives in a cave at the base of a nearby mountain, surviving off berries and visions. And an old woman who lives in a hut somewhat grander than my own, closer to town but also in the woods. She says she

prefers the peace and quiet, but I think she wants to avoid close scrutiny by the townspeople, who might accuse her of witchcraft. She certainly has a way with healing herbs, and if she is a witch, she is a helpful one.

Still naked, my guest sat on one of the stools. I set a mug of tea in front of him and poured another for myself.

“I don’t have milk or sugar.”

He shrugged.

I had three eggs left, the result of a trade with the witch-woman, who kept hens. I boiled them lightly, placed them in a bowl, and laid it in front of him.

“None for you?” he asked, head cocked.

“I’m not hungry.”

While he ate, I sat across from him, sipping tea and sharpening the knife I’d been using to slice meat. He watched me silently.

I didn’t mind the quiet, being accustomed to no company but my own and sometimes going days without hearing a human voice. I found his presence surprisingly comfortable.

“What is your name?” he asked after devouring all three eggs.

“Berndt.”

He chuckled. “Apt. You do rather resemble a bear. You may call me... Arnulf. Yes, Arnulf.”

I nodded. It didn’t matter to me what his real name was.

He picked at the eggshells and I finished sharpening my knife. Then I had nothing to do with my hands and no place to rest my gaze, so I stood and returned the pot to the flame for more tea.

“It’s kind of you to give a stranger food and shelter,” he said. “And you’ve asked nothing about who I am or why I’m here. Aren’t you curious?”

“It’s none of my business.”

I was, in fact, very curious. But I was used to keeping myself to myself and, therefore, couldn’t begrudge another who did the same. I didn’t turn around to look at him.

“I’m from far away. I became separated from my companions. Lost. I’ve searched for them for a long time, but I don’t know if I’ll

ever find them again.” He spoke plainly, but sorrow tinged his words. “It’s difficult to hunt by oneself.”

I didn’t comment on his lack of hunting weapons. Perhaps he’d lost them as well. “I manage. But there’s been little game lately. Last winter was too harsh and this summer too dry.”

“You’d do better with a partner.”

“I hunt alone.”

We drank our second serving of tea without further conversation. Afterward I washed the dishware and started my chores. I had several deer hides, the curing and stretching process nearly complete. I wanted them ready for the next time I went into town, where I would sell them to the shoemaker and to the family that sewed coats. The coins would help get me through the winter, paying for bread and a few other necessities.

As I worked on the hides, Arnulf watched. His constant attention was both unsettling and exciting.

By the time his clothing had dried, the sun was well into its descent. We went outdoors so I could continue to tend the meat. I’d have to bring it inside before sundown if I didn’t want scavengers to steal it.

“What’s beyond the town?” Arnulf asked.

“Fields, then mountains.”

“And beyond that?”

I shrugged. I’d never been that far, nor had I spoken to anyone who had. If travelers passed through from that direction, I never saw them. They would have stayed on the main road rather than venturing onto the little path to my hut.

“Perhaps they’re in the mountains or beyond them,” he said, referring, I assumed, to his missing companions. But he didn’t sound as if he believed it. “I’ll search for them there.”

“Winter will arrive soon. The mountains become harsh then.”

“Loneliness is harsh.”

I shook my head, not to deny the truth of his statement but to deny its significance. You couldn’t do anything about loneliness, just

as you could do nothing about plagues or droughts or frigid temperatures. You had to endure those things—or die from them.

Arnulf opened his mouth as if to say something but remained silent. Looking at me.

“Sleep here,” I offered. “The woods aren’t safe at night.”

“The woods are never safe,” he said with a smile.

And I smiled back.

That evening I indulged us both with a meaty stew. I even made noodles, and we ate some of my stored apples for dessert. It was a feast, and perhaps I was foolish to allow it, but I enjoyed both the food itself and watching Arnulf eat. He licked his fingers when he was finished.

I rarely stayed awake for long after sundown, even at this time of year when the days were growing short. Light and heat wasted fuel, and sleep allowed me to avoid the feeling of the dark forest pressing in on me, waiting for the moment to finally engulf me. So after tidying up, I laid some furs on the floor near the warm hearth. Arnulf curled up in them and, likely made weary by travel and his unaccustomed meal, fell asleep almost at once. I tossed and turned a bit on my cot before I slept as well.

A sound.

I was on my feet, fauchard in hand, before I was even awake. Fortunately I didn’t swing the weapon, because Arnulf stood only inches away. I could barely see him, but I smelled the scent of the forest on his skin, and I felt his body heat as if he were made of glowing coals.

“Berndt.” His voice was an exact echo of the need deep inside me.

With uncharacteristic carelessness, I let my weapon drop.



In the morning we shared our bodies again, and then breakfast, and then silence.

“You could stay,” I finally said. It was a genuine offer, but I wasn’t surprised when he shook his head.

"I must find my companions."

"Perhaps they'll find you here."

"No." His eyes held infinite sorrow. "They wouldn't come so near a town. As I wouldn't have if I hadn't been so hungry."

I didn't ask him why. My heart knew the reason, even if my foolish head didn't yet understand. But still I said, "Stay through the winter, at least. You can search for them in the spring."

"I cannot spend the starving months here." Then he reached across the table toward me, his open hand curled upward. "But you could come with me. Together we could hunt well enough to keep us fed, even in winter. I'll show you our ways. Make you one of us."

I shivered from longing and something darker. And from fear, although I'm not easily frightened. And knowing in my soul what I was refusing, I shook my head.

"This is my home. I built it myself."

And what was there to say after that? I was willing to give him more than I could spare: dried meat, my fur cloak, my spare bow and some arrows. But he would take none of it.

"Good-bye, my bear," he said. Then he ran off into the woods, disappearing quickly among the trees.

Did I hear howling that night as I sat alone in my hut? I don't know. Maybe it was just the winter's first winds coming down over the mountains.



The cold arrived all at once and stayed around like an unwanted guest. Everything grew brittle; breathing felt like blades in my lungs. Nothing came to my snares, and the river iced over so thoroughly that even fishing was impossible. I spent my days hunched in front of the fire, rationing my meager food stores, hunger gnawing at my belly. At night I slept deeply, wrapped in furs, as if I was turning into my namesake beast.

I went into town rarely, but when I did, I'd stop at the witch-woman's house along the way. "You shouldn't be alone out here," I'd

tell her, although I understood her solitude. “Move into town, at least for the season.”

But she refused to listen. Her children and grandchildren looked in on her now and then, she said. And she’d offer me something they’d brought her—some bread rolls, a slightly withered apple, a pot of honey. I wasn’t too proud to accept, just as she gladly took a warm fur I brought her.

I thought about Arnulf all the time, replaying the few waking hours we’d had together and the one panting, gasping night. For the first time, my isolation felt like a burden I could not bear. I had to stop from wandering into the forest and losing myself.

And then one day a thaw arrived. It was a false promise; true spring was still weeks away. The old people had a name for this kind of warmth, which came with a mocking full moon and would leave a few days hence, dropping us into the most profound cold yet. Wolf weather, they called it, because it was sly and deadly.

But since the air would be relatively balmy for the time being, I decided to walk to town. I didn’t really need anything, and I had no money, but I wanted to hear human voices. I took the longer pathway, the one that bypassed the witch-woman’s house, because it was rarely traveled by anyone but me and so, I hoped, would be less muddy.

The town had six taverns. I only visited one of them, and that one just a few times a year. I liked it because it was dark and I could skulk in a corner without attracting too many wary looks. The townspeople were never quite convinced that I wasn’t a wild animal come to join them. The tavern wasn’t crowded that day. About a dozen men and women clustered near the fire, drinking and gossiping. They nodded at me as I tromped to the bar, but either my fauchard or my overall appearance made them uneasy, like deer catching a predator’s scent.

“Haven’t seen you in ages,” said the landlord, reaching for a tankard.

I put up a hand to stop him. “I’ve no coins. I hoped you wouldn’t mind if I just... sat here for a bit.”

He was a slightly plump man with a sharp gaze, and after a brief pause he filled the tankard from the tap and handed it across to me.

“You’ll have coins later. Every man needs a bit of ale now and then. Besides, I understand that you look in on my mother-in-law now and then, and I appreciate it. Stubborn old woman.”

I smiled my thanks and took a long draught of the liquid. “I’ve told her she shouldn’t be out there alone.”

“You tell her, my wife tells her, my brothers-in-law tell her, but she won’t hear.” He shrugged. “What can we do?”

“This winter has been especially hard.”

“I know. Have you heard about the lord? Oh, probably not, out there in the woods. It seems even he’s not immune to the cold. He’s taken ill. They’re saying he won’t last another month. Then I suppose his son will be our new lord.”

I felt no pity for the old man. He’d had none for me when I lost my entire family.

“It won’t make any difference to us,” I said.

“No. But I like knowing that however high and mighty they might be, they can’t escape death.”

We chatted a little more as I drank, the words gradually coming more easily to me. He filled me in on more town gossip, and we speculated about the weather to come. He agreed that the temperature was bound to plummet again soon. We both expressed our wishes that this year would prove more bountiful than the last.

When my tankard was dry, he refilled it with a grin. “One pint’s hardly enough for a man of your size.”

I took the drink to my favorite table in the back, where I nursed it for over an hour, letting the conversations wash around me. More people joined the group near the fire, and although they sometimes glanced my way, none of them invited me to mix with them. If I’d gone of my own accord, they wouldn’t have protested, but neither would I have been a part of their chatter.

The landlady emerged from the back room with their young daughter, a merry-eyed girl of nine or ten in a hooded cape the color of rowan berries. The child clutched a covered basket and looked eager to dance out the door, but her mother held her back for some final murmured instructions. I doubt the girl paid much attention.

When I was that age, I rarely listened to what my parents told me. I assumed I'd have the chance to learn from them once I was older.

A few minutes after the girl rushed off, the landlord strolled over to offer me another pint. By then I'd had my fill of human company, so I thanked him politely and left. But I didn't head home immediately. Instead I stood for a time beside a nearby fountain, remembering how my mother would scold me for splashing in it with my friends. Some of those boys had died in the plague; the rest grew up, married, and had children of their own. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken to any of them.

What were my remaining ties to this place? I'd been a coward for never leaving.

With those morose thoughts, I set out for my hut. This time I took the route that, although it would be muddier with the thaw, would get me home sooner. I would check my snares again, and if I was lucky, I'd have rabbit for dinner.

The witch-woman's hut was twice the size of mine and considerably older. With its worn log walls and sagging shutters, it might have been standing there as long as the forest. At this time of year, her herb garden was nothing but earth and bare sticks, and the rose vines she'd twined onto an arbor gave no hint of the color they'd carried all summer.

I planned to simply pass by, but then I remembered the little girl. She might need reminding to return to town before darkness fell. But even as I approached the wooden door, I sensed that something was wrong. Perhaps I heard a cry or caught the familiar smell of spilled blood. Then I saw that the door was slightly ajar, and I rushed inside.

The little girl crouched in front of the fireplace, her arms folded protectively over her head. They offered little defense against the enormous wolf standing a few feet in front of her, its teeth bared ferociously.

I shouted and the wolf whirled toward me. The girl scrambled back into a corner.

Perhaps if I hadn't been blocking the door, the wolf would have run away. But I hefted my fauchard and took a step toward the

animal. Something in its posture changed, became less threatening. It was far too lean—its ribs evident even through its gray fur—and I knew it must have been sheer desperation that led it to attack humans. The beast simply wanted to live, just as I did when I snared a rabbit or shot a stag. I started to lower my weapon.

The child screeched.

Acting on pure instinct, I surged forward and speared the wolf's neck with my *fauchard*. When it screamed and pulled back, I struck again, dragging the blade down its chest and through its belly. It howled piteously and collapsed onto its side, bleeding profusely.

I am not a cruel man, and I do not enjoy the suffering of others. I raised my *fauchard* for a third blow, this one aimed at its heart so as to kill it quickly. In the fraction of a second before I brought the blade down, I looked at the wolf's face and saw familiar tawny eyes staring back. They held sorrow rather than hate or fear.

It was too late to stop myself. The *fauchard* struck home. The light in those eyes faded at once.

When I returned to my hut some time later, I saw prints in the soft mud: a single set of bare human footprints heading to my door, and a set of doglike paw prints going away.

In the days that followed, the story spread among the townspeople. I didn't tell it, so it must have been the girl or the witch-woman. And in the telling, the story changed, and when spring finally arrived, people insisted that the wolf had already swallowed the old woman but she'd sprung out alive after I sliced open his stomach. Of course that is complete nonsense. In her haste to protect her granddaughter, the woman had fallen, splitting her scalp and injuring her hip. But I don't believe the wolf laid claw or fang on her. The girl was completely unharmed, although I suppose the events might have traumatized her.

I came into town very rarely that spring and summer, and when I did, I refused to allow anyone to buy me ale at the tavern. I merely traded my meat and skins for the things I needed and then returned to my hut, where a wolfskin lay draped on my bed. No matter how

often I wrapped myself in it, the ice from that winter never melted from my heart.

Now the autumn has arrived again, its first chill coming over the mountains and curling through the air. The hunting was good this year. Even after paying the new lord his share, I have plenty put aside for the winter.

I cannot find it in myself to care.

Tonight a wind rustles through the trees. The moon shines down, full-bellied and bright. I left my fauchard leaning against my hearth and have the wolfskin around my shoulders. It's warm and smells of the forest.

Somewhere out in the darkness, wolves are baying.

I stand in front of my hut empty-handed, and I wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

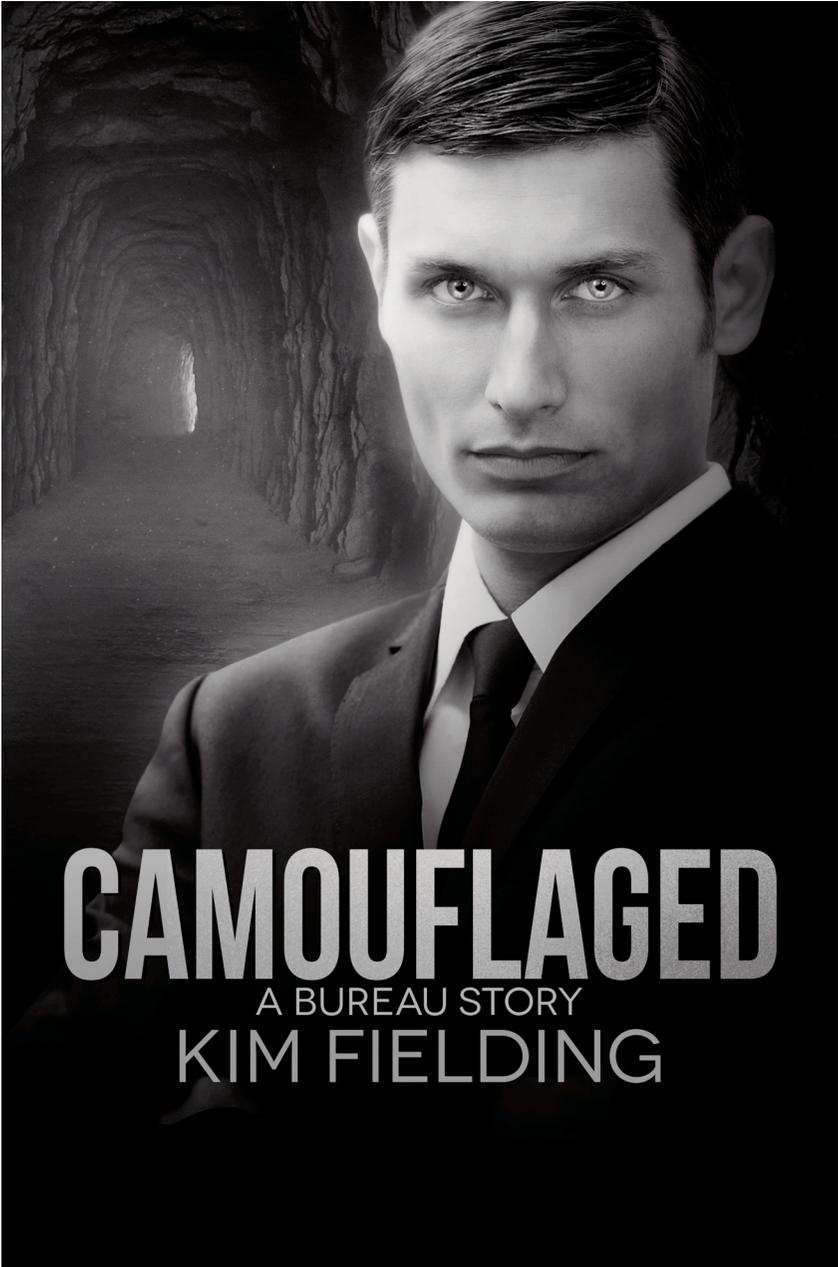
Kim Fielding is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. A Lambda Award finalist and two-time Foreword INDIE finalist, she has migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States and currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two daughters who fully appreciate her, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

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