

RICHARD HOLINGER

The Huntsman

The huntsman hates going home. The bed is too soft and his widowed half-sister's children—how many are there?—are noisy and spoiled. He eats at the castle with the rest of the help at a very long table set with pewter. The castle serves greens, fruit in season, and whatever he has shot, stabbed, strangled or crushed to death. He supplements these meals by foraging like a bear, then sleeps in a cave or the hollow trunk of a tree.

The huntsman is loyal to his queen, willing to perform any feat requested by her. He has also lusted after Snow White, her stepdaughter, ever since hearing her sing in the courtyard.

"Oh, what I could do with her," he muses while gutting an eight-point buck.

He knows the forest's fauna. He has observed foreplay, coitus, separation. He warms his hands in the odoriferous death stew tumbling out, the knife blade bloody with entrails. Afterward, he wipes the weapon with early October lily pads before sheathing it. He loves the fall, the season most awake to death, transition, escape, corruption. There is something of the savage in autumn, the breaking south by fowl, the hard burrowing by mammals, the rabid consuming by humans who leave nothing to chance, the body on the brink of the year's worst onslaught, readied for the frenzy of flight, safety, and storage.

The call from the queen comes during noonday dinner, a nobleman, no less, sent to fetch him from the oaken table where he sits halfway down in line of servitude between sommelier and barber.

"Huntsman!" shrieks the nobleman from the kitchen portal, as if he would not deign to enter farther into the dark, smoky fire-lit cavern.

"Sir?" the huntsman bellows, already beginning to rise.

"The queen requests your presence at once."

"Sir!" the huntsman affirms, wiping the grease from his hands on his buckskin trousers, then licking his fingers before running them through his beard to purge the grossest entanglement and free snared bits of sausage, late tomato, and pumpkin.

He has never come face to face with the queen. Seen only from afar on feast days making pronouncements from the balcony above the courtyard, she appears statuesque, a monument to prey that has thus far eluded him, his forest prowess impotent to stalk and bag her grim, aloof presence. He thinks her beauty legendary, like the paintings in the Grand Hall he has seen only once, on the visitors' tour of the palace the day he was hired.

He follows the perfumed gentleman upward through halls of increasing breadth and light, rooms ever more decorous and plush, until they stop outside two enormous doors sentineled by guards he often sees supping before the servants sit down.

"The huntsman!" The announcement turns a huge metal ring and one door creaks open, giving the huntsman his first sight of the throne room. Dazzled with the light of a thousand torches, he inches forward, the wealth and ceremony making him cower as no outraged bear could force him to. Attendants, lined up like pines in a reseeded wood, gaze at him through a crust of distrust, awe and disgust as columns of cloaked spearmen, heads fixed in place, follow him with eagle eyes.

"Your Highness, Bridson, the huntsman," the nobleman declares.

The queen sits a scant ten strides and two steps up in front of him, buried in ermine and mink that surely he trapped, skinned, and tanned before piling them at the seamstress' door—that little weasel-eyed flirt with a needle for a heart.

A hand slaps his back, and as he turns to crush the nobleman, sees him bow abjectly, and taking the hint, imitates the unnatural gesture.

"Huntsman called Bridson," the queen's deep monotone bids him face her again. "How long have you worked for me?"

She has a costume face, a mask of white powder on her cheeks and dark red wax on her lips that both frightens and compels.

"Twenty-five years, mum."

"Are you a loyal subject?"

"You have none more so, my queen."

How he would like to shed the pelts from that thin torso and have at that haughty body!

"Come." She rises, and raising a slightly gnarled finger, motions him to follow. An invisible door opens in the wall behind the

throne, and as the huntsman passes through, he finds himself alone with her in a room no bigger than a pantry with a single torch blazing beside a long mirror.

“Do you know Snow White?”

“Who, mum?” he answers as though the very idea never crossed his mind.

“The girl with the black hair. Sings by the well. Boys fancy her. Seventeen, eighteen years old. Likes to play with animals and pick wildflowers.”

“Ah, you mean the woman that pats the muskrat and feeds the wildfowl down by the stream?”

“The very one,” the queen says dryly. “Mirror? Show me the fairest one of all.”

Where the bland reflection of the opposite wall has been, suddenly an image of Snow White appears sitting on the well lip, her mouth moving silently in song.

“I want her dead.”

“Dead, mum?”

“Slit her throat, cave her brain in, hold her head under water, smother her with a pillow, choke her with a water snake. I don’t care how you do it, but I want her to disappear.”

The huntsman has been up against some vicious felines, but this one scares him more than any with retractable claws and pointed fangs.

“Your will is done, mum.”

“Fast. I want it done fast. Tomorrow or the next day. Next time she goes to the forest. Get her alone.” The queen takes a step toward the huntsman and stares him in the eye. “Do what you will to her first, huntsman.”

Then she is gone, and another door opens opposite where he came in. A guard pounds his spear on the floor, a sign to follow.

That night, lying on a bed of oak leaves by the stream where he has watched Snow White coo with the birds and frolic with furry four-legged mammals, he deliberates not on her death, but on her absence. She has become part of the woods, as natural to his surroundings as the crow and beaver. He traps to supply food, not to collect corpses. If he notices a decline in a species, he lets it alone for a few seasons to give it time to regenerate. He will miss peering through raspberry bushes as Snow White slips out of her tunic and

into the stream, thinking she is alone, paddling through water with animal ease.

But next morning he is up before dawn sharpening his knife at the palace grindstone, the sparks showering off the wheel like a fountain of stars. He will not ravish her or make her suffer. He knows which of the body's pathways to occlude and sever to bring death like an annunciation. In heaven, she will reach down and thank him.

It's mid-afternoon before she glides down the path through the bright autumn sunlight, her way dappled with shadows and leaves. Above her, the trees glow golden and ruby, as though their approaching death made them all the more radiant.

The huntsman does not hesitate. He unsheathes his knife, waits until she bends over the bank to call the fish to her, then soundlessly pads down the grassy incline until his shadow overcomes her wet reflection.

"Ah!" she gasps, turning her face upward, the back of her left hand thrown over her open mouth, the hem of her dress leaping up a bare thigh as her right leg straightens for balance.

He has never before been this close to her, and such beauty confounds him. It is as though she has pulled a weapon on him. He is stunned, unable to bring down his hand holding the knife over his head.

"Who are . . . ?" Snow White stammers. "What do you . . . ?"

"The huntsman, girl!" he shouts as if a stentorian voice might arouse him from his stupor. "Your provider."

"And what . . . what do you want from me?"

"Your life!" he bellows, hot tears smarting his eyes, blurring the scene.

"But animal I'm not!" she protests, gathering her legs under her dress and sitting up cross-legged.

"The queen," he explains, relaxing a little now from his icy posture, the numbness dissipating. "She wants you gone. You...you are . . ."

"Yes? Yes?" she says like an excited schoolgirl.

"You are too beautiful."

She blushes the color of pink maple leaves.

"Do you think I'm too beautiful?" she asks in a whisper, at the same time sweeping smooth with her open palm the leaves beside her.

The huntsman instinctively takes a step back and thrusts his knife forward as if to fend off an attacking boar, but all the girl does is raise her eyelids and gaze at him from beneath long, curvaceous lashes.

"I think . . . I think," he tries to speak, his voice thick as backwater mud. "I think you are more lovely than the winter hare."

Her laugh circles his waist and hugs him tight. She has delighted him, and in so doing, has rendered him impotent. He sheathes his knife and kneels beside her. "Don't you see? I am here to kill you."

"And the prince comes to love me." Her smile widens. "However, the prince does no more than sing, and you do no more than talk."

When her face moves up to his, when her lips press on his, when her arms go around his, he cannot retreat. The huntsman feels her tongue breaching his clenched teeth, her warm saliva leaking down his chin, her hands crossing his back, her knees climbing onto his thighs, her small, perfect breasts pressing against the thick strap of his crossbow.

The huntsman is scared. Never has he been attacked this way. It is always he who knows what game needs to be bagged, and he goes for it with appropriate preparation, resolved not to fail, not to come home without vanquishing his prey. He surprises and subdues with no hesitation or regret. He takes what he can use and leaves what remains for others to feed on.

He shoves the girl, who for a moment balances precariously over the stream's edge, then rights herself and stands on two spread feet, her eyes searching his, then flees, bounding like a silver wolf slipping through thorn thickets until only a distant crack of a wind-blown branch.

"Snow..." the huntsman calls half-heartedly, then shouts after her, "Run, Snow White, run! You must outrun the mirror's eye!"

When he can no longer hear her escape, he glances at the spot on the bank where she has been lying, kicks through the leaves, and heads into the darkest part of the woods to kill something.

Three or four weeks pass.

During that time, the huntsman returns home. With the girl gone, whatever has pulled him away from domestic life has fled with her. He occasionally cooks with a niece, takes a nephew hunting, even puts up with the incessant whinny of his sister. He feeds the palace what he can pick up easily around the collection of thatched-roof houses and barns—rats, stray dogs, unguarded cats, and aging unfenced

farm stock which he drops in the kitchen under foreign-sounding titles, but eventually taste and toughness betray their nomenclature and the food goes untouched. Nobility yells at the servers who yell at the cooks who yell at the huntsman, but he pays them no mind. At night he sits by the hearth until the ashes grow cold, then tramps across the earthen cottage floor and up the ladder to his loft where he stretches beneath a leathery long-haired pelt.

Then comes another call.

The huntsman is in the middle of sawing wood, the ragamuffins playing leapfrog beside him, when the nobleman announces his arrival with a bellowed, "Huntsman!"

The game stops and they all stare at the stranger dressed in bright red and yellow clothes beneath a hat that looks like a furry mammal dipped in purple wax.

"You like to play?" Jack, eight, asks in a high-pitched voice.

"Your presence," the nobleman says with a slow, dignified delivery, "is requested by the queen."

"I must leave," the huntsman says. "But presume me back quicker than a henpecked husband's fart."

On his way to the palace, the nobleman fights each branch and bramble with flailing arms and hands while grumbling "Sodding flora!" as he stumbles over roots and uncleared brush. Only after they enter a small door in the palace wall does his composure return with the familiar obeisance paid him by servants and guards. After traversing halls, staircases and antechambers, they arrive at a large door with a shiny brass handle on which he knocks twice.

"Enter," the queen's voice commands.

The nobleman opens the door, waves his guest inside and, remaining outside, pulls the door shut.

The huntsman feels weak. Never before has he imagined such opulence. Mirrors, drapery, furniture, statues, paintings, rugs, fireplaces, mantels. And the bed, the size of a rainwater pond.

"You failed me."

Dazzled by the surroundings, he doesn't see the queen until she speaks. In an upright, haughty posture, she stands beside a giant urn on which a man draws back an arrow ready to be loosed.

"Your Highness?" the huntsman answers, innocent as water.

"She lives!" she screeches.

“Who, mum?” he queries, trying to keep his voice even. “Who lives?”

“Simpleton, barbarian, beast.” She spits these words, saliva sprayed from lips of ruby coals. “You let her go, you let her go, you let her go!” The queen turns and begins to sob in long, hysterical wails.

“It wasn’t...I didn’t...she couldn’t....” His face burns from embarrassment. For the first time he has failed to bag the ordered prey.

“The fairest!” she cries and drops onto the bed, pounding the mattress until the fit wears out. “The mirror says seven tiny men in the forest rescued her. I should have known no one but I could destroy her. And I have. Not with knife or sword or bow and arrow. Not a man’s crude weaponry. No, I did it with guile, cunning, and...and artistry.”

She turns, composed now, and sits on the edge of the bed. “With temptation. You see, Woman has learned nothing since Eve. Most women, that is. They’re just as dumb as the first one, and just as easily fooled. All it took was a little transformation and a beautiful, round, shiny apple. What female can resist so innocent an orb? ‘Eat, eat, my dear, eat,’ the nice old lady tells Snow White. ‘This fruit will keep you young forever.’ And, true to the witch’s word, it does. She lies in the woods under a glass canopy like a saint on display in heaven, never to wake, never to love.”

The queen sighs deeply. “Oh, those seven urchins gave me quite the chase. Ran me off a precipice, but what’s a little fall to one whose intimacy with nature exceeds even your own? Can you pick the plant or spot the toad to metamorphose, after a slow simmer, your very soul? I had my magic to cushion my landing, my hate to bring me home.”

The woman abruptly gets off the bed, strides over to him, hauls back her right hand, and brings it forward with all the force her small body affords. The open palm, when it hits his hairy face, makes a muffled *whump*. Her eyes bite into his as the long, black, sharpened fingernails of her left hand, curled like a cat’s claws in front of his face, slowly, as if she has rehearsed the move, advance toward his cheek, latch onto a spot below his right eye, and plow four furrows through the underbrush of beard to the cliff of his chin.

He cannot move, cannot defend himself, cannot fight back, her thrust of anger making him stupid not with fear, but with the same amazed dullness he feels when checking a trap and finding a bitten-off leg.

The queen turns, his blood dripping from her hand, outstretched as though she has been struck blind and reaches out to fend off danger.

“Now,” she says, plopping down on the side of the bed and dropping her green velvet sandals onto the floor. “I want to ask you a question. Do you have a family?”

He glares at her through the pain. “Of a sort. Live with a half-sister and her lot. Help keep them fed.”

“No.” She mouths the word slowly, drawing out its rich significance. “No, you don’t.”

The huntsman swallows. “Yes, mum. I was just with them. The nobleman, he saw them. Jack, or maybe it was Theodore, asked if he wanted to play leapfrog. He told the lads no, he had to fetch me right away. Here. To you.” He takes a step toward her. “And not to worry. I know the forest. I’ll find Snow White and disembowel her, if that is your wish. I never disobeyed Your Majesty until . . .”

“Dead,” the queen says in a flat voice. “Every one. Skewered from anus to tongue and hung up to dry like spitted pigs.”

She reclines on her side and closes her eyes. “I am fatigued. Leave me.”

He looks around the room. The archer. He will help. With uncertain steps, the huntsman crosses the room, grabs the urn’s curled lip and lifts, testing its weight. He needs a better hold. Circling the work, he notices the beautiful woman weaving a cloth and a ship whose oarsmen row frantically by several young women as a man tied to the mast wrestles to squirm free. What does it mean? What does it matter? Art confuses him. Better it be put to use than stared at glumly for centuries.

On his knees, he hugs the pot, struggles to a standing position, and hefts the giant pot over his head. Now he will deliver the justice she deserves, one leg lunging awkwardly forward at a time toward the bed.

“My queen!” the huntsman groans under his heavy burden, the stentorian voice turning her face toward him. Seeing her eyes open, her face go ashen, her hands lift to her face and her legs tuck under

her dresses, he hurls the vase down in front of the bed, its crack and shattering crescendo ear-splitting, the eruption sending large and small shards in every direction, the queen unhurt, but shrieking like a wounded bird of prey.

Behind him the door clanks open, but he takes his time picking up a pointed piece of pottery, then grabs her neck between thumb and index finger while with glazed bodkin carves a red path around the circumference of her face, chin to cheek to forehead to cheek and back to chin before lifting the bloodied, screeching royal off the bed and ordering the sword-drawn guards, "Guide me from this palace safely, or this will be the queen's last day on earth."

Once in the woods, sure no one has followed him and his game, he drops her with less thought than three-day old carrion. She moans like a milk-heavy cow, but he knows she is not seriously wounded, and will be found before she can bleed to death. He knows, too, she will not resist the pull of the reflective stream, and after one look she will thereafter live the rest of her life avoiding the honest gaze of a mirror.

The huntsman tears through the forest agile as an antelope, his legs flying over storm-torn limbs and wild rose thorn patches. He will not stop to see the slaughtered family because he cannot help them in death. His destiny, growing clearer with every stride, is to find Snow White, carry her listless body to a place of refuge where he will unceasingly work to undo her ghastly bondage, and start his life over with her.

Maybe, this time, as a woodsman.