



STEPHANIE GREY

*When
Comes
the
Huntress*

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Penelope Roux anxiously paced the length of her small cabin, her black-heeled boots dully thumping against the thick wooden planks of her floor. She paused, her hazel eyes peering through her window, streaks of mud and debris clouding her view.

Her cabin was backed against the forest, being as far away as possible from the town of Fairhaven. Bare trees were sprinkled with snow, and the forest floor was an endless sea of white peppered with animal tracks. Fairhaven could be seen as a tiny dot in the distance, which is how Penelope preferred it. She knew she was an outcast. The townspeople had made that very clear from the time she was a child. At age eleven, her mother had taken her to this cabin on the edge of the woods and left her. Her father had taught her how to hunt and which plants were safe to eat before he died when she was only nine. She drew from his knowledge and foraged for herself, living alone and only venturing into town when it was absolutely necessary.

Hunting was easy for someone like her, a Huntress. Her father had told her of others like her, who possessed increased strength and reflexes. There were few throughout the world, but they all bore the same mark: a perfect half-moon on their left wrist, raised and with the slight shimmer of a new scar. They were considered to be touched by the Devil himself.

Penelope, at eighteen, knew this was foolish. People are scared and threatened by what they do not understand, and she decided this is why they cast her aside with hatred. She herself had never felt this way about the townspeople, despite their cruel whispers and glares when she ventured into Fairhaven. A man had attacked her once as she traded rabbit meat for flour, had even pointed his pistol in her face as he screamed for her to leave. She calmly took her flour and turned away, determined to keep her head held high.

Today there was a group of men gathered nearby, their pistols and rifles raised angrily. It was rare to see people this close to her cabin. When they hunted, they tried to stay far away. She occasionally crossed paths with fellow hunters in the woods, but they always left hurriedly. They were unsure if their guns could protect them from her. What they didn't understand was that *she* was not the threat. They hadn't seen what the forest really contained, why God had really created Huntresses.

Beasts of all sizes and capabilities lurked in the woods. Some were harmless, and Penelope left them alone. Those that weren't, which were most of the creatures who called the outskirts of Fairhaven home, were eliminated quickly by Penelope. It wasn't always an easy fight. She often found herself tending to her wounds, mild or severe depending on the ferocity of the beast. Two winters ago when she had broken her arm was the first and only time she'd wished for company as she healed.

The leader of the group was shouting about a wolf. His words were muffled, but Penelope could hear his tale about Jacob Hatier's untimely and gruesome death a week earlier, followed by the death of Jacob's brother, Joseph.

"Did you see the wolf?" asked someone.

The leader stopped, his eyes wide. "Only a wolf could have done such damage!" he proclaimed.

Penelope retreated from the window. She hadn't been in the woods for a few days, but she didn't recall seeing unfamiliar tracks. Wolves were uncommon in this area, but so were new creatures during this time of year. Even they didn't want to freeze in New England.

She settled herself into her chair and opened a book to read by her fireplace. If it was a

wolf, it wasn't her concern. Regardless, she knew the townspeople wouldn't want her help. To be sure, though, she would check the woods at first light when she was alone.

A knock on her door startled her. No one had ever come to her cabin. Inhaling deeply, she stood and placed her book in her chair. She pushed strands of long, dark hair away from her face and opened her door. "May I help you?" she inquired.

It was the leader, his tall and lean frame standing in her doorway. His brown eyes looked at her warily, betraying the confidence he was attempting to project.

Penelope raised a brow in question. "May I help you?" she repeated.

The leader cleared his throat. "I know what you are."

"Yes, I believe everyone does," Penelope replied darkly.

"We don't want your help. I know this is your property, and I'm here to tell you we will be hunting this wolf on our own. If you interfere, there will be consequences. You enjoy a certain level of treatment in town. I believe you have a working relationship with Mr. Wickleton who owns the general store. I would hate to see that disappear because of your interference. We need no woman's assistance, even if you are a filthy Huntress." The leader nearly spat out the last word.

Penelope felt her jaw tighten and silently nodded.

"I'm glad we understand each other." The leader turned and hastily retreated.

The door closed, Penelope exhaled sharply. She hoped, for their sake, it truly was just a wolf.

Four days passed, and Penelope noticed the group that gathered nearby each morning was dwindling. Those who remained were badly injured, some barely able to stand. It was sheer will and determination that fueled their continued quest. She knew there was no wolf. No wolf could do such damage and decimation.

Despite her better judgment, she had heeded the wishes of the leader and had not interfered. She was fairly self-sufficient, but she could not risk losing the ability to trade with Mr. Wickleton. She had, however, ventured out after the group departed for the evening, to search for tracks. She'd picked them up easily, and they were unlike anything she had ever encountered. They were very large and misshapen, almost as if a human had severely mutated.

The tracks led too far out to continue following as darkness closed in, and Penelope, frustrated, returned to her cabin.

The next morning, only three men remained. Penelope watched them gather themselves and pray. They moved nervously, wiping down their weapons, obviously trying to prolong reentering the forest.

Penelope put on her thick, gray wool coat and hunting boots. Even as she stepped outside, she saw the leader raise his hand, trying to stop her approach. Ignoring him, she walked to the men and withheld her gasp at their injuries. This close to them, she could see the depth of every wound, and even smell the infection that had settled. They were going to die today if she didn't

go hunting herself.

“I told you to stay back, woman!” the leader snapped.

“No,” Penelope said defiantly. “You are to remain here while I find this creature.”

“It’s a wolf.”

The other two men frowned. “It’s not a wolf,” one of them said softly. “We don’t know what it is.” He looked at her imploringly. “Do you really think you can kill it?”

“I can,” Penelope promised.

“You will not!” the leader shouted. He charged her, and Penelope thrust her hand forward, shoving it into his chest. He flew backward, landing hard on his back several feet away.

“Stay here,” Penelope commanded.

The others, relieved, sat wearily on the ground.

Penelope turned and entered the woods. She found the tracks once more, her body alert and prepared. Three hours passed before she came upon a wooden house with a tin roof that hung over a rather wide front porch. It was perched on the edge of the ravine that separated Penelope from the house. Carefully, she stepped forward and looked down at the rocky bottom. It was strewn with bodies, none of them completely intact. Limbs were scattered around as if the creature had ripped them off the bodies and tossed them as an afterthought. Their blood was a stark contrast against the white snow, almost pretty.

“A woman? I haven’t seen one of you yet.”

Penelope glanced upward to see an incredibly tall, powerful humanoid figure covered with coarse, chocolate brown fur. Its hands and feet were wide like bear paws, and each ended with sharp, black claws. Its head was that of a wolf, and its yellow teeth were shiny and pointed.

“Is it a coincidence, do you think, that I haven’t seen one of *you*?” she asked calmly.

The creature laughed. “Do you look like they do on the inside?” He pointed down to the ravine.

Penelope shrugged. “Mostly.”

The creature stepped to the end of his porch and leaned heavily against a wooden post. “Did they send you because they think a woman will defeat me?”

“Why do they want to defeat you?” Penelope asked, her eyes searching the ground for a thin yet sturdy branch.

“I suppose it’s because I rather enjoy eating humans. I ran out of them at the last place I lived. I decided to come here. There aren’t too many other creatures to compete with for food. Couldn’t believe my luck to find this little home here. That old man was a bit tough.” The creature picked at his teeth with a black claw. “There’s still a piece of him in there.”

“Most of the creatures who come here don’t want to eat humans. They love to attack us, yes, but they tend to find our flesh too stringy.” Penelope found a branch and sat down, her legs crossed. She removed a knife from her coat pocket and began to whittle. She looked up and smiled. “You’re the first one I’ve met who can talk. Where did you say you lived?”

The creature eyed her suspiciously. “I didn’t. You’ve encountered other creatures?”

Penelope nodded. “Oh, yes.” Her gaze had returned to the branch. “We used to get a lot, but the population has dwindled over the last couple of years.”

“It must be the cold.” The creature frowned. “It has to be the cold.”

The branch sharpened, Penelope stood. “The cold is helpful, yes.” She moved away from

the edge of the ravine.

“Don’t run,” said the creature. “Everyone always runs. I always catch them.”

Penelope erupted into a sprint, then leaped off the edge. She sailed through the air across the ravine, landing roughly on her feet and rolling to the side. Using the momentum of her roll, she was able to stand.

The creature squinted at her thoughtfully. “A Huntress. They sent a Huntress after me.” He grinned. “But you’re nothing. You’re tiny. You can’t defeat me.”

Penelope threw the branch, its sharpened point lodging firmly into the creature’s right eye.

He growled and yanked out the branch, his eyeball attached to it. Roaring, he rushed toward Penelope. She moved to his right side and pushed two posts supporting the roof over the front porch. It came crashing down on him, and he roared once more. He sprung up, his body going through the tin roof that had fallen on him. Shrugging it off, he began searching for her.

Retrieving her branch, Penelope threw it again. She missed her target, the branch bouncing nearly harmlessly off his thick skull. The cut it created gushed with blood, running into his left eye.

“I’m going to savor you, Huntress. I’m going to turn your skin into jerky and taste you for weeks,” the creature vowed. He charged toward Penelope, his claws ready to rip her flesh.

She jumped onto his back, her arms circling his neck. He reached for her, his claws tearing into her skin. Searing pain radiated through her arms, and she gritted her teeth. She continued to climb up his back until her feet were on his shoulders, and her hands were clasped underneath his chin.

He growled and shoved them both against a tree, her back exploding with pain as it hit the solid bark. She pulled upward, feeling the muscles and tendons beginning to tear.

Desperately, the creature tried to yank her off of him.

She continued to pull until finally, his head was freed from his body and they both fell forward. Her arms were shredded and bloody, and she was breathing heavily.

Penelope rolled his body into the ravine. She grabbed his head and walked into the ruined house. The fireplace was still standing, and she tossed it on top of the firewood before setting it ablaze.

Once the fire died, she made her way back to her cabin. It was fully dark by the time she arrived and she sat down in her chair, exhausted. She glanced at her wounds and, her body protesting, rose to tend to them. She carefully cleaned and bandaged them, then collapsed onto her bed, quickly falling asleep.

Another knock sounded late the next morning, waking Penelope. Her body aching, she answered it.

The leader had returned, his eyes downcast. “We’ve seen what you’ve done,” he said quietly. “And we thank you.”

Penelope looked past him to see the remaining men from the leader’s original group, along with their wives and the widows and of the dead.

“We know what you do,” he said. “You are welcome now. We should have never cast you out. We’re deeply sorry.”

Penelope was too tired to speak. Instead, she mustered a small smile and nodded. She

closed the door and sighed.

She still preferred to be alone.