

Hunter
A Short Story

River Writing

It came without warning. Just a moment before, the bells of the great clocktower were still ringing, bellowing to the streets that lied at its feet. Autumn had just about settled in, and the streets were bleak with soft rain. Puddles lingered between the bricks, trees at the forest's edge swaying but softly in the gentle winds.

I was making my way to the physician for a bad foot when the first clouds rolled in. It had been raining all day, so a storm barely surprised me. If anything, it was soothing to see water pouring down after the dry summer that came before. I recall straightening up my collar to cover my shivering neck, the cloak that rested on my shoulders only barely holding on as the wind picked up. The dark leather glistened in the rain, my boots dully glimmering as the final rays of sunlight passed through the rain clouds. I never had time to contemplate the sudden change in climate, though. I had just about made it to the physician and entered through the elegant glass-and-wooden doors. I allowed them to swing closed behind me and never turned around to look upon the darkening sky.

The extended heels on my boots made my footsteps all the more audible when I stepped upon the shop's tiles. I glanced around at the variety of herbs and weeds that grew both in extravagant pots and in more functionally inclined troughs. The rain poured down gently on the greenhouse's domed ceiling as I walked deeper and deeper into the

physician's domain. It was only after I had passed through half of the greenhouse, that I called out his name. "Tom! Tom, are you here?"

At first, my calls seemed to fall upon deaf ears. The rain filled my mind like static as I peered around at the shelves upon shelves of green. Some of these plants I knew by name, others were but a distant memory of drawings I had seen at the library. Tom had always been an avid collector of exotic species. These plants were, undoubtedly, no different to him. To me, though, they might have been fascinating if Tom's sudden arrival had not made me jump so much.

I... That is all I remember. Please, let it be enough.

Don't stop.

“Sarah, what a surprise!” The way his voice pierced the relative silence made me shoot into a more upright stance, swiftly turning on my heels to look at the greying elder. “For Christ’s sake, Tom, you are going to be the death of me,” I exclaimed quickly as my breathing slowed again, my shoulders relaxing once more under the non-existent weight. “Surely you are not quite one to speak! You gave me quite the fright when you were just standing there!” “You did not hear me calling out?” “No, I do not reckon I did.” “Age must be getting to you.”

“Now, now, miss Sarah, there is no need to be rude,” the elderly man spoke dismissively, before pacing to one of the shelves, a rusty tin watering can clutched by his long, bony fingers. Sarah merely scoffed, her gaze already having wandered off to more interesting views, such as the complete lack of sunlight outside. She soon brushed it off as her forgetting the time, which happened more often than not. She shook herself out of that train of thought not long after, turning her attention back to Tom, who had already begun to tend to the remainder of the greenhouse plants. “Tom, actually, do you have anything for sore muscles? I twisted up my ankle pretty badly last week, and my foot is aching like a pulled tooth,” she explained tenderly. Now that her thoughts had taken her back to more pressing issues, the stinging in her foot became evident again. A hissing breath was funnelled through her teeth as she recognised the strain and began to shift her weight to her left leg instead.

Tom scarcely needed any thought to put into it, for he answered nearly instantaneously. “The ferns in the back, soak and compress them on the wound, keep the skin warm with cloth or wool. Yes, wool would do,” the man muttered under his breath, most of it being vented out of his lungs as he suspended himself over the edges of a trough, to water the plants in the middle of the table. “Right, thanks Tom,” Sarah replied quietly as she paced to the back of the greenhouse. She grasped a pair of scissors that lied on a metal table next to the shelf, before using it cut off some of the front fern’s leaves. “Three leaves per foot should do,” Tom notified her. “I know the drill...”

Sarah took the herbs to a sink by the wall, holding them under a soft stream of flowing water that Tom also used to fill his watering can. It was when the leaves had just about started to soak, when she heard a strange noise coming from the front door of the shop. It almost sounded like knocking, but the rhythm was off. It seemed frantic. “What in the blazes-,” Tom cut himself off as he set the watering can down and headed towards the door. He reached for a short-handled spade that he kept in a bucket by the greenhouse’s entrance, taking it with him to the front of the shop. Sarah kept an eye on the direction of the front door, but the lack of sunlight drowned it in shadows. Absentmindedly, the water had started to run up her sleeves, making her flinch a bit at the sudden sensation of wet cloth upon her skin. She pulled her wrists away and turned the valve, closing the

stream of water that flowed from the tap, into the basin. Tom's footsteps faded into the near-distance, causing Sarah to shift on her feet uneasily, earning another pained hiss from her lips. From the door, the sound of Tom's voice sounded like but a whisper.

"Young lady, but a moment!" She could hear him speak, followed by what she assumed was him putting away the spade. Hearing him refer to someone outside the door made her less on edge, making her return her attention the herbs, until she heard a frantic shout, followed by a crash, and the shattering of wood. Her eyes shot back towards the door, but she saw nothing. "Tom?" She asked. Part of her wanted to believe that he had just tripped or something similar, but another called for more immediate attention. Hesitantly, she placed the herbs in the pocket of her long, dark coat, as she paced into the direction of the front door. Leaving the singular overhead light behind, she entered the darkness warily.

On her way towards the storefront, she grasped a broom that stood by what she assumed was the shop counter. Her fingers carefully traced along the just slightly damp wood, as she stalked forward, making sure to soften her step as much as she could. Then again, even with all the care in the world, her heels oftentimes betrayed her, scraping just barely over the floorboards, or coming down just a little quicker than anticipated. Every little noise made her flinch and catch her breath, before holding it again as she took another step.

Once she had sufficiently approached the door, the room had started to become more and more illuminated by the streetlights that shone through the windowed front wall. The golden light danced slightly between the panes as it cast a barred shadow over the tiles on which she now stood, which covered only the very front of the store. At first, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary, which only scared her more.

There was a complete lack of doors within the frame. Scrape marks could be seen on the tiles below where the doors should have been. Holding the broom ahead of her like a blunt spear, she allowed her gaze to drift over the markings, before following them to the side, and a grizzly sight. The doors had been torn off, now lying just beside the counter, along the wall that flanked her. One door seemed to have been thrown against the timber, while another lied flat on the ground. She followed the mess further until the golden lights revealed a deep crimson. Realisation set in like a carriage behind crazed horses, as she knelt down by what remained of who she could only assume was Tom. The flesh of his neck, along with what would have been his throat, was torn out. The bloodied white of his spinal cord lied in full view, as it connected to the base of his skull, which, in turn, never connected to a face. The man's eyes had rolled back, leaving only the haunting blankness of his fate. All of the skin had been torn away from his face, tongue gone, ears chewed off as well. She looked on in horror. She wanted to desperately to avert her eyes, but she could not bring

herself to. Those glazed white orbs, somehow even in this state, stared into her soul. Little did she know that something other than her was staring back. At least, she was scarcely aware until that fabled sixth sense kicked in, and she flung her face towards the doorframe.

In her peripheral vision, something scurried off into the street. In a haze, she shot up from the floor and tightly held onto the broom she had picked up. The wood had started to splinter a bit in the palms of her now sweaty hands, but she ignored it. *I have to leave.* She thought to herself. *Before it comes back.* Thus, she recalled the backdoor that was rarely used by anyone but the delivery man, preferring her chances there over those in the street in which she had seen that shadow.

Carefully, she started to retrace her steps across the room, backwards for now. Her ankles quivered at the thought of meeting a fate similar to the shopkeeper's, as she returned to the darkness. She only halted to glance around once she was met by the greenhouse light, which remained intact. Frantically, she glanced around once more to spot the entrance to the storage room, which connected to the greenhouse, and the backdoor. She held her breath as she started to pace backwards again, nearly tripping over her own feet a few times, before awkwardly starting to descend down a short flight of stairs that would lead her into the adjacent chamber. The first few steps went fine, but the third was slippery, causing her to lose her balance almost instantly, sending her tumbling down the remaining four steps, and landing flat on her

back. She gasped for air harshly as soon as she collided with the ground, sending her back up in an arch as she wheezed. This sent her into a coughing fit, which she tried to muffle with her sleeve to the best of her abilities. Confused, she noted how the sound faded nearly right away.

Once she regained her strength, she scrambled to her feet and quickly dashed towards the backdoor. Whatever was out there would have heard her by now anyway if it was listening, so she did not much care for any noise she made now. She reached for the doorknob and twisted it, only to find the door to be locked. Cursing under her breath, she refused to go back to look for the key. Instead, she reached for a set of tongs that lied in a shelf beside her, which she knew of due to her incident with the handcuffs a few days prior. She grasped the tongs tightly with both hands and jammed it into the rotten frame of the door, using it as a makeshift lock-breaker, prying away at the rusty mechanism. This building was old, and she hoped that chipping away enough of the surrounding wood would allow her to diminish the lock from a grinding halt to a minor inconvenience.

It took her no longer than a minute to pull out splinter after splinter of wood, until the door creaked under the lack of stability. Not wanting to make anymore noise, she refrained of kicking or bashing the door in. Instead, she placed her shoulder firmly against beside the doorknob, and started to slowly apply more weight and force, until she could hear the timber breaking.

After a rather short struggle, the door flew open, sending her after it. In that wild stumble, she managed to just barely grasp the doorknob, stopping the carpentry from crashing into the wall and creating even more unnecessary noise.

Now back on the streets, an alleyway between the physician and the adjacent locksmith, she glanced around as rain started to sprinkle down upon her forehead. She reached behind her head and pulled up the hood that came attached to her cloak, draping it over her dark blond hair to shield her from the rain, as well as unwanted attention as much as she could. The rain seemed to have created a low-hanging fog, allowing Sarah to see only a few meters ahead of her. Feeling claustrophobic, she decided to head somewhere with more people, to hopefully get a better idea of the situation. *Strength in numbers, right?* She assured herself as the threat started to seem more and more distance.

The silence was deafening, only the static rain remaining above her head. She had to physically stop herself from speeding up into a jog as she walked towards the alleyway's exit. Once there, she peeked her head around the corners, one by one, hoping to spot whatever was out there before it could spot her. After noticing a lack of movement, she let out a relieved sigh and nearly darted out of the alley, once again forcefully slowing herself down. She stuck to the left side of the road, where the buildings were taller, in hopes of being harder to spot in their shadow. Then again, now that night had fallen, it

seemed to make little difference. Nonetheless, she pushed on towards the marketplace. If not for the people that should be enjoying the winter fair by now, then for the police station connected to it.

As she got closer and closer to where the marketplace was supposed to be, a strange orange glow became more and more evident within the fog. It became almost blinding, before she stepped onto the marketplace itself. The fog seemed to have been lifted slightly there, making way for a grim spectacle. The great townhall, and the church next to it, had caught aflame. Roaring fire stuck out from every nook and cranny, blazing from the rooftops and walls, smouldering on the foundations. Sarah's breathing hitched, her eyes widening at the sight of such destruction. The static between her ears started to become more and more shallow, allowing her to hear screams and distant calls for help. Perhaps, for a moment, she considered helping those unfortunate enough to be caught in the fire, but the sound of gunshots in the near distance sent her scurrying into an alleyway instead.

In a crazed panic, she started muttering to herself. *I need a gun, I need a gun, I need something.* She clutched the tongs that she had not let go of since leaving the physician. The fire was too much of a beacon, she could not stay. But she also could not leave without a weapon, which left her with only one other option. She looked to what she hoped to be the south, the direction of her home, where she kept a firearm, stashed away below her bed, underneath a loose plank. *Get a gun, then get out.*

She promised herself as she climbed from her knelt position back onto her feet. Panting in an adrenaline-induced state, she dashed towards the alleyway's southside, and into the connected street. For the sake of her sanity, she assumed that whatever was out there could not hear her from too much of a distance, yet it seemed to not be alone in that. That fire had been roaring for at least half an hour, and she had heard none of it.

She had to trust that something was working in her advantage, if only to give herself some room to breathe. And so, she did not stop until she was met with a crossroads, a familiar one. Then again, in the fog everything looked familiar, yet so different. The atmosphere was oppressive as she looked around at her options. She scanned the street for anything that could make her remember which way she was going, and where she was supposed to go. That was when she recognised a sign above a door, on a building cornering two of the four streets. 'Brandy's Pub', she recognised it. With a lack of moon, or sunlight, it was hard to make out directions, but at least she knew that she was heading the right way now.

She started to jog again, this time past the pub and into a smaller street that would soon lead her into a neighbourhood just outside the city centre. A relieved sigh was blown from her tongue as she recognised the buildings. She was only a few blocks away from her home. Now out of breath, she slowed down into a more comfortable pace and headed further south.

Looking to reach her home in one fluent journey, she decided to take a shortcut through another alleyway. This one, however, she knew like the back of her hand, as it was pretty much next to her house. She was comfortable in the dark there, but that confidence was soon shattered by the sudden appearance of a silhouette.

Ahead of her stood a shadow, drawn out against a streetlight, it bared the resemblance of a woman. The woman seemed to cross her arms, shivering a little. After freezing up at the sudden sight, Sarah's first instincts were calmed again by the familiar figure. She stepped forward again. "Ugh, you scared me there, lady. Everyone's making me jump today. Where are you going?" Her first question was, trying to see if she knew this woman. Her expectations, however, were once again smashed into a million pieces when she heard that haunting voice. Every word wheezed with an unnatural amount of breath, as if forced out of the throat. "Young lady, young lady," the voice repeated, soft yet melancholic in some strange way. After Sarah froze again, unresponsive for a good two seconds, it spoke again. "Young lady, young lady. One moment."

Unnerved by the voice, Sarah quivered, staring to back away as the silhouette moved towards her. "Young lady, one moment." Sarah's steps became hastier and more unhinged as she backed away, until her eyes squinted shut at the sound of gunfire. Smoke rose from behind the silhouette as Sarah's eyes fluttered open again. A blood gurgling noise left the creature's throat as it dropped

lifelessly onto the ground, slumped over onto its side within the second the shot was fired. Sarah watched it twitch for a moment, before recognising another silhouette in its stead. His flank turned towards her, Sarah recognised the figure as a constable, the blue illuminated just slightly in the golden light of the street behind him. He lowered his gun at the sight of Sarah. The young woman was about to call out to him, when more gunfire a few streets away caught the officer's attention, making him dash off as quickly as he had shown himself.

Sarah quickly dashed forward in an attempt to catch up, but once she reached the alleyway's exit, the man had already disappeared into the fog. Deciding not to set off on a fool's errand, Sarah turned instead into the direction of her home, electing to remain on the path she agreed with herself upon. Before departing, she turned around to face the corpse on the ground. The body oozed a repulsive stench unlike anything she had ever smelled, and she had worked with the dead more than enough. It was a strange mixture of rotting flesh and an open wound, but what made it truly averting was the slight aftertaste of sulphur, like one were standing over a body that had been left in the sun for a few days before being burned in dog dung. Her eyes started to tear up, so she quickly left the alleyway behind, the lighting too scarce to make out anymore details of the body, other than the strange occurrence of its arms and legs all being the same size. Sarah wasted no further time in getting to her apartment building halfway along the street, where she

swiftly opened the front door and hurried inside. Noting how the door was fully intact and closed, she trusted that she would be safe of whatever creatures were hunting people outside, so she dashed up the stairs with not as much regard for tact as she had for speed.

It was within that same minute that she reached her own apartment, opening the door with the small key she held in her inner pocket and heading deeper inside. She closed the door behind her, just to confuse anything that might have followed her inside, before pacing to her bed. She promptly knelt down and reached underneath the metal frame, grabbing the loose plank she had rigged herself, and yanking it up in one fluent motion. Once pulled aside, she reached for a lockbox that rested underneath the floor there. Carefully, she pulled it over and reached for another, slightly bigger key in her pockets with her free left hand.

Rather gracelessly, she jammed the key into the lock and twisted it rapidly, listening to the shifting of the mechanism, feeling the lock opening with the palm of her right hand. She flipped the lockbox open and gently took out a six-shooter she kept hidden away inside, along with a small box of live rounds. She pulled the weapon closer to the window so she could see it better in the slight hue of the streetlights outside. That was where she opened the gun's chamber, tilting the barrel down, noting that it was currently empty. Fumbling the box of rounds, she brought out six bullets, carefully loading them into the fireweapon's magazine. She subconsciously counted

them, and closed the magazine at six, tilting it up with two fingers, as it snapped shut. She did not yet pull the hammer back as a safety precaution, instead pocketing it as it was then and placing the box with the remaining bullets in the pocket on her left hip.

Okay, let's get out of here. The slight triumph of the situation gave her reason to believe that an escape by train was in sight, thus she harboured the aim to head for the train station next. If she could not find a train there, she figured that she would have to try the docks or walk. She preferred the first but knew that the latter was a more realistic option. *But let's not get ahead of ourselves.* She muttered as she rose to her feet once more, heading towards the door and promptly leaving her room behind in its current state. She never looked back as she descended down the stairs, nor did she look over her shoulder when she left that building. She focused only on the road ahead, and the thick fog, as she moved into the haze.

She walked for what felt like hours, her right hand resting in on her hip, where she clutched the grip of her weapon. Her heart pounded in her chest with every corner she turned, every streetlight she passed, every gunshot in the distance. Whatever these things were, they could be killed with bullets, which gave her a kind of solace that she feared. The kind of solace that you get right before taking the first shot in a duel. That moment of sweet euphoria, just before taking a life. Just before the horror sets in. It was that taste of euphoria that lingered in the

back of her mind when she turned the final corner, into the final street, the final bricks that would lead her to the train station. In the distance, she could hear the faint sound of an engine, the outline of smoke just barely visible behind the buildings that blocked most of her view. She gasped in relief as the closest thing to salvation she had hoped for seemed to closely within reach. Imagine her heart sinking into her boots when beyond the fog, a silhouette appeared. Back turned to a streetlight, cast in shadow, it stood there, seemingly looking down, arms folded together as they shook unstably. Unwilling to take any chances, Sarah took out her six-shooter and pointed its sight at the figure's head.

First, her thumb on the hammer, it clicked.

Then, her index finger on the trigger, it quivered.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Three.

Its head lifted. "Lady?"

One breath.

One shot.

One bullet hugged by the air, then by flesh and bone, as it struck the silhouette between the eyes. No noise was made beyond the shot. Not when the bullet hit its mark, and not when the body hit the floor, lifeless. With this triumph, the euphoria left her system. Sarah's breath hitched with the bitter aftertaste of taking a life, as she stalked forward towards the body. As the darkness settled, and the golden streetlights cast their light over the

body, her heart skipped a beat. It scarcely beat when she recognised not the dark grey of the creature she saw in that alleyway, but instead the blue vest of someone like her. She could barely make out the wound in his forehead, the cap two metres ahead. A tear fell as she realised what had happened, but she never had time to mourn, for in the distance she heard more footsteps. Perhaps as a fugitive, she scrambled and waned into the darkness, towards the smoke she had seen. Without a shred of thought, she acted on impulse, and fled, leaving the body behind for whatever was following closely after her, until the footsteps faded, and all she could hear was the wet noise of flesh being torn from bone, and fabric being ripped.

Sarah soon saw the outline of a train, a locomotive in front that had started to move. The vague flame of the oven that fuelled the beast caught her eye, and she started to sprint, faster and faster, until she met the train's flank. It was when she met the steel frame that she could not find a way in, until a voice met her ear.

“Take my hand!”

She did not think when she looked to the side and saw an unfamiliar face, nor did she flinch when she took the hand outstretched. She did not waver when her feet hit the train deck. She only watched as the silhouette of her home was returned to the horizon, the flames of the fire still there.