

HONORABLE MENTION

First Outing by Ryan McBriar

“Are you sure we’ll see him today, Father?”

Father continues gathering sticks, placing them carefully in the crook of his elbow. “Son, what have I always said about being sure?”

I pause, close my eyes, tilt my head back. “The only sure thing is the sun, and even he hides on occasion.”

When I open my eyes, Father is quite a distance away. I rush to catch up, snatching up a few branches of my own from the forest floor.

“You saw him here last time though, right?”

Father looks at me and smiles almost imperceptibly. “*Them*,” he corrects.

I almost drop the kindling I’d collected. “You’re fooling me.”

Father motions with his head for me to follow, picking up the trail back to camp. He talks over his shoulder to me. “Usually, whenever I’ve spotted him, he’s alone. A solitary creature, as most of the lore says. The last time, though, something had changed.”

Even though we aren’t speaking eye to eye, I know immediately that Father isn’t trying to fool me, and a slight chill runs down my spine. Earlier that morning, when we were preparing for my first Outing, Father had covered all the usual precautions: the importance of not making contact with the creature; the necessity of keeping a safe distance at all times (“You’re never as safe as you think you are,” Father is known to say); the art of observation and memory tools to record every detail for later documentation. He had never hinted at the possibility of a multiple sighting--at least not in front of Mother.

We arrive back at camp in silence, a silence effortlessly enforced by Father using his will alone. Dropping his pile of sticks in the clearing we decided on as our base of operations for the evening, Father finally turns to me with a smile larger than any I’ve ever seen on his gentle face, but I notice the smile does not include his eyes. “You have questions, son. Now is the time, while I start the fire.”

I drop my sticks on top of Father’s and he builds a pyramid in the hole we dug this morning, contemplating my first question carefully.

“Why didn’t you mention the multi-sighting earlier?”

“You know why.”

“Mother,” I say, and we share a conspiratorial grin.

“Ask the question you really want to ask,” Father says.

“Are we in more danger than usual?”

“One creature is dangerous to us. More than one is more dangerous, naturally, but as long as we follow procedure we will be fine.”

I nod and kneel by Father to observe how deftly he gets the fire crackling. A question flits across the surface of my mind, a name, a memory. My chest tightens. I try and dispel all three from my thoughts but they’ve already made it to the muscles of my face, like a rabbit pushing its nose through the fence around Mother’s garden.

“What is it, son?”

I know better than to lie. “I was thinking of Brother.”

Father turns without standing and grips my shoulders with his strong hands, arresting my eyes with his. “You wonder if this is the selfsame creature who took your brother away from us?”

My mind flashes on the blood, the unnatural wounds, the hole left in our family by Brother’s sudden absence and equally shocking return, savaged and dying.

Father nods, but his words are meant to soothe. “This is not what you think it is,” Father assures. “It is procedure: observe, record, report.”

The fire is roaring now, and we wait for night to soak the sky in darkness.

I sleep some and wake to a few dying embers. A large shadow looms near the treeline. I freeze, tensing my body for action, and then realize it is Father. He motions for me to follow.

We walk the dark forest for what seems like hours without speaking. I know better than to interrupt Father’s concentration or question whether he knows where to go. Eventually we arrive at another clearing. Father wordlessly indicates that I should stand in front, crouch, and wait.

The creature appears. Contrary to Father’s most recent encounter, it walks alone. Its appearance is still shocking to me: it looks so much like us, like Father especially, in shape and form, albeit somewhat smaller. The lack of hair is what immediately makes the thing feel *wrong*, its body and limbs not covered in thick, coarse hair but instead practically wrapped in tight fabric, which Father and the other experts can only assume provides the warmth denied by the lack of a full coat of hair. There is hair on its face, but it is paltry at best.

In the dark I hastily begin the practiced method of taking mental notes, but before I can commit anything to memory I notice the weapon wrapped in the creature’s hands. My chest tightens again at the sight of it, an unnatural cylindrical combination of metal and wood. It is then I realize Father is no longer at my side.

The scene is clear to me.

The creature hears Father coming but is taken off guard by his speed. “Father!” I yell, forgetting all safety protocols. Even at this distance I see his (I’ve determined the thing is male) eyes widen at the sound of my call. He manages to fire the weapon once.

A sound like thunder. Projectiles exploding in a tree nearby.

“Stay!” Father roars. This time the creature lets out a scream of its own because Father is upon him.

I heed Father’s order but avert my eyes. Sounds surround me. Crunches, shrieking, wails. The weapon never fires again, and the creature falls silent. Minutes pass and the silence deepens.

Then Father is at my side again, his face framed in crimson.

“You will not report this, son. But you will remember. Come, help me clean the site.”

I nod. “No evidence.”

“No evidence.”

Ryan McBriar, “First Outing”

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