

Folks in the village talked behind her father's back, making all sorts of cruel jokes. When she was younger she went unnoticed, like a stain on the dark-paneled walls. People would say unkind things right in front of her. But she soon grew lovely and others couldn't help but notice her. She was even invited by the Order of the Myths to be Queen of their Mardi Gras ball. Her costume included a shimmering dress and a jewel encrusted mask. It was a combination she couldn't turn down. She knew she shouldn't have left him alone that night, but she thought just this once it might be okay. After all, it had been quiet for weeks.

Her father taught her everything she knew about the wilderness. And at night in front of the fire she would teach him to read. She was only ten when he took her hunting for the first time. He didn't expect much, but she quickly brought down a rabbit. The soft fur and the way the meat tasted when cooked over wood fire coals simply mesmerized her. By the age of twelve, she had progressed to bow hunting.

Their rustic cabin had been built deep in the forest by her father's own hands. Still, he made certain it was close enough to town that she could go to school there. During their first night in the cabin, she was awakened by a distinct knock on one of the trees right outside her window. Another quickly followed. Believing her father was teasing her, she knocked back against the wall. But the knock that soon came after was too hard and loud to be her father's. In the pitch-black she could hear heavy dragging footsteps and fists against the window. Trying to slow her heartbeat while at the same time struggling to scream, she only managed the faintest whimper. Finally, she tiptoed in her socks to the main room where her father was standing, his gun in hand. They both heard a guttural moan just outside of the front door. It was low, almost songlike. Her father swung the door open hard to the empty night air.

The next morning, they found an enormous oily impression smeared on their window. Most nights it returned, knocking against wood and windows, scratching to get in, groaning and finally rushing off into the thickets. At night she sat up in bed clutching her quilt close, with a lantern burning into the darkest hours. Every so often a night would pass in silence, but that only made her more uneasy for what was to come.

Sometimes her father would chase after it, only to come back mud-streaked and covered in mosquito bites. He would never tell her what happened, but he smelled of swamp and some sort of deep musk. Once, he came back clutching a clump of long brown fur. He was like a man possessed, setting up razor wire around the cabin. He warned her to set pots down gently, so the sound of cast iron against wood couldn't be mistaken as a knock.

She knew she shouldn't have left him alone, but she couldn't resist being the queen of the parade. She came home late that night carrying her heels and laughing, dreaming of the boy she danced with. It took her a few moments to realize that the windows were smashed and there were long deep scratches in the door. She spent the rest of her days knocking against trees, waiting for the reply she was sure would come.

